border line

THE Comics Magazine

May #10

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COOL BEANS WORLD

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This month's mildly topical thanks go to Paul "Smitty" Smith, Denis Wojda, my Dad, Ian Bates, Paula, Jamie Delano, Sascha Thau and everyone who sent me their best on my 40th. Cover design by the infinitely cool Jim Campbell, Art by Paul Smith – This was one we couldn't leave to Chance...

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INDUSTRY STANDARD

Phil Hall's final bit of doom and gloom for the near future...

SO, where were we?

US and UK comics industries up the swanee; short-termism rules; major comics publishers are as tight as a nun is with sexual favours. All looks bleak...

Hold on a second... Isn't Borderline supposed to be the *pro*-comics magazine? The periodical that doesn't look at the mess the US industry is in, but prefers to look at all the positive aspects? This is true, but let's face it, people, there's not a lot of point in us waxing lyrically about the wonders of 100,000 plus sales figures when most of us are aware that 100K in sales is pretty piss poor. And how can we try and expect ourselves to ignore such matters when in the last month alone both Top Shelf and Drawn & Quarterly, two major independent comics publishers, have literally begged people to help them stave off impending doom?

An interesting addendum to last issue's comments about the lack of support from major publishers: in Borderline's name, I was attempting to obtain a few freebies for reviewers from our old friends at Marvel Comics - knowing full well that I was probably on a hiding to nothing. I was informed by Bill Rosemann, *"We have recently had the hammer come down on comps. So at this point, I don't believe any industry media contacts are receiving comps. Sorry, but this is simply the reality of the situation. And due to crackdowns on international mailings, I'm only sending preview packs to contacts in the States. Hey, I hate it as much as you do, but we're all being asked to function within the necessary parameters"*. This suggests that for all the positive hype Marvel has been spinning it is essentially in such a dire financial situation again that it has scrapped its entire complimentary copies policy! I might have been fed a line, but I doubt it. And just what does "*function within the necessary parameters*" actually mean? And why on Earth should the bodies that exist to help promote this truly amateur company have to abide by these rules?

Rosemann obviously does far too good a job at hyping Marvel and while Wizard and CBG and even the likes of us and all those internet sites continue to give Marvel as much coverage as its heart desires, then why should it change its policy of not sending freebies out to all but those that they're really worried about not getting coverage from? I have to say that it sickens me that one of the biggest players in the US comics industry is in a position where its PR man has to send out e-mails like this and freely admits to the journalists that it's broke, with a subtext of "Hey, we know you guys are morons for supporting us, so you won't mind while we butt-fuck you a bit more!"

There isn't going to be an immediate change either, because the likes of Michael Doran and Matt Brady, Beau Yarborough, Sean Jordan, Mike Conroy and all the other reporters and reviewers and commentators *won't* stop covering Marvel; and Marvel knows this and exploits it. If DC tried this we'd probably have commentators throwing hissing fits at them and claiming DC staff gang raped Jack Kirby's children in the 70s - but we'd still cover DC product, wouldn't we? Yet Marvel is being far from vilified, while what they are doing is quite abhorrent. Surfing the message boards on the Internet, the feelings of disgruntlement are becoming clear - the honeymoon is over for New Marvel as far as some of the fans are concerned.

Here are a few prime snippets from the boards: "I find that the macho BS projected by the Marvel executives gets more sickening almost week by week. They're entitled to think that they're cool, of course; I'll retain my entitlement to thinking that they're just tenth rate would-be Stan Lee impersonators with zero style". Or how about, "I can't even particularly blame them for trying to increase their sales with a constant succession of mouthy stunts - after all, their main promotional tool is an internet-load of excitable and largely uncritical fans who lap it all up". There was also, "their titles are forever loaded with non-comics pages which I can't ignore and which just leave a bad taste in my mouth these days" and "The way Marvel, and in particular Bill Rosemann, talk, you'd think that Marvel had just single-handedly saved the comics industry, when in reality they're now probably using an industrial nail gun to hammer down the industry's coffin lid."

Of course, the sad truth is *you* don't *really* care as long as you get your comics regularly and the publishers - the big ones - know this. They know you'll go out there and buy your Spidey and X-Men and whatever, month in and month out, regardless of the whining and moaning. Marvel knows that it really isn't going to amount to a hill of beans if Borderline doesn't give them good - if any - reviews or news coverage. So the situation isn't going to change.

It makes me want to say that while Marvel is taking the piss, we won't be giving them the coverage they're expecting to get. But of course we'd be cutting off our noses to spite our face and Marvel knows this...

IN CASES LIKE THIS YOU HAVE TO

June 2002 sees the long awaited return to the comic shelves of multi-award winning series Leave It To Chance. Borderline's Nigel Lowrey took this chance to speak to series artist Paul Smith and discuss both the history of the series and his work on it.

SEPTEMBER 1996. The comics speculator boom of the early 90s was over but had resulted in a lot of cash being earned by a core of creators and publishers, one of the prime examples being superstar artist Jim Lee. Having turned his Wildstorm imprint into Image's top franchise, Lee then went on to create a new imprint called Homage Comics, whose purpose was to provide a home for various creator-owned series such as Astro City and Strangers In Paradise. The latest addition to the line was a brand new launch - Leave It To Chance. At first glance, it didn't seem that promising... the protagonist, teenager Chance Falconer, looked very reminiscent of Marvel's character Jubilee, while her pet dragon brought to mind Marvel's other teen X-Man Kitty Pryde and her pet alien dragon Lockheed. The saving grace was the talent involved: Starman writer James Robinson and former Uncanny X-Men artist Paul Smith (ironically, co-creator of said Lockheed). Their pulling power proved strong enough to get people to open the first issue, and to then discard any doubts about the first instalment of what was to become a highly regarded series enjoyed by readers of all ages - and won the Eisner, Harvey and Don Thompson Memorial Awards for Best New Series.

The initial concept behind the series developed when Robinson was still writing the monthly series Firearm for Malibu Comics. That title featured a black detective as a recurring character and Robinson thought it would be interesting to develop a set of stories around his daughter, a young African-American girl in the course of trying to emulate her father. However, Robinson, a writer noted for imbuing his leading characters with aspects of his own personality, was unsure about further developing the concept into a regular series, due to concerns about his own ability to successfully portray a protagonist so far removed from his own experiences. Malibu insisted that it was a highly uncommercial concept as it was, and so Robinson discarded the idea. Some time later, though, Robinson realised there was not much material in the comics field for female readers who were not in the alternative, semi-Goth, Vertigo-reading mould, so he returned to the concept of a young heroine on her adventures. He mentioned this concept, self-described as "Nancy Drew meets *Kolchak the Night Stalker*", to his friend Paul Smith, who had drawn the critically acclaimed The Golden Age project written by Robinson for DC. Smith revealed his own ideas for a female lead in a space fantasy but felt that Robinson's was the stronger concept, and it was this that led the writer to invite his colleague to collaborate again, knowing that the work would be better with a co-creator involved early in the evolution process, and also making the prospect of a pick-up from a publisher more likely with a complete creative team involved.

Smith lays most of the credit for the series' foundations at Robinson's door, insisting that of

his own original space series "the only carryovers, beyond George, are my wacky humour and Bullwinkle theory. It had to be a book for everyone regardless of age, sex, education, etc. The general foundations were in place when he called, from there it really can get murky. While the fantasy elements and the ACU were my suggestions, they were a reaction to the building blocks James provided. My favourite analogy is that most of the story titles are mine, while many of the covers are James' ideas. He even did a thumbnail sketch of #3."

The two creators spent a lot of time and effort developing the series and transforming it into an attractive submission package. "I spent weeks learning how to use computers and Quark," Smith recalls, "and we put together a beautiful proposal package. Descriptions, designs, models, stories, outlines, it was quite a production and got us... absolutely nuthin', HUNH, sing it again. The universal non-response was staggering."

Robinson had worked his way up from the independent comic scene of London, through the American smaller publishers and up to the larger, mainstream US companies but because he was led to believe that what had become Leave It To Chance was a risky proposition for publishers, he took the series to the larger independents who were in a better position to take financial risks. For a while, it rested at Bongo Comics, but Matt Groening ultimately decided not to publish it as it lacked the broad humour of the Bongo line, although the *Simpsons* creator now admits that it was a mistake to reject the series. "We proceeded anyway, intent on self-publication if necessary," says Smith. "I fill the garbage with page after page till something workable starts to shine through. Finally, the book is done and within moments (I kid thee not, moments) Kurt Busiek calls, 'Whatever happened to that... girl, detective, dragon thing?' Within 24 hours, we had a deal at Homage." Not only was the series to be published with the high production values expected from Jm Lee's publications, but full ownership of the characters remained with Robinson and Smith.

Robinson and Smith wanted readers from outside the usual comics-reading groups to be able to enjoy the series, so they spent time analysing how to appeal to them. The concept was simple: in the city of Devil's Echo, Lucas Falconer is the latest in the hereditary line of occult investigators who combat the evil mystical forces that routinely attack the city. His daughter Chance is now 14, the age when training traditionally starts for the next generation of Falconers, but her father has suffered the loss of her mother and believes the calling to be too dangerous for his daughter. To prove him wrong, Chance is determined to become an adventurer and gain acceptance from her overly protective father. Robinson has structured each story to run no longer than two parts so that any newcomer can understand and enjoy any given issue. He has also managed to control the level of language so that the stories can be understood by children as much as by adults, but enjoyed by adults as much as by children because the wording is

LEAVE IT TO JAMES

Taking time out from his increasing presence in Hollywood, writer James Robinson spoke to Borderline's Nigel Lowrey about his work on Leave It To Chance, Starman and his upcoming movie projects...

Borderline: It's been a long hiatus for Leave It To Chance so are you excited to be returning to the series? Does the fact that you co-own the series make it a more personal or important project?
James Robinson: Yes to both. And that after the three issue wrap up of the Chance storyline currently running, we'll be doing her continued adventures in large format single volumes like Tintin books, which is I believe the perfect format for her.

BL: Paul Smith and yourself seem to have a very loose, organic and fluid way of developing a story and laying out an issue of LITC. Is it easier to work that way and would you like to work like that with more artists, or would you need to trust the artist or develop a strong relationship first?
JR: It's the way I work with Paul. Pure and simple. We get an ebb and flow going and it just works. Normally, I'm way more of a control freak...

BL: You invest a lot of yourself in your characters; for instance Jack Knight shares your interest in pop culture collectibles and you were an Englishman living in California writing about an Englishman living in LA for Firearm. Who most closely shares your voice in LITC?
JR: I don't think there's much of "me" in Chance. I love all the characters, but I deliberately veered away from the introspective stuff I do all the time. If I had to pick one character, I guess it'd be Bendix but I'm really grasping at straws.

BL: Will LITC have running themes or character story arcs now that you will be releasing it annually, or will each release be self-contained with no connection to other issues so that they can be read in any order, like many European albums?
JR: More the latter. I can't say that I have it worked out yet to that degree. We'll see. I do believe a lot of that is more organic and spontaneous than many writers will admit.

BL: Your first collaboration with Paul Smith was on The Golden Age from DC; your planned sequel, The Silver Age, was greenlighted but never appeared. That was a few years ago now, so is that project dead or are you still waiting for Howard Chaykin to draw it? With the current interest in the classic DC characters, and after the success of The Golden Age itself, it would probably do really well right now...
JR: Yeah, but I am so beyond that right now. Mark Waid covered a lot of the ground I intended to. Chaykin's doing TV, and I don't believe I have the same affinity with that era of comics.

BL: You returned to the classic characters from DC's Golden Age with the

concise but never simple or condescending.

Similarly, Smith has adapted his art to be more accessible to the non-traditional comics fan. While smooth and fluid already, here it looks slicker still and results in a pleasing animated look. Halfway through the second issue, his visualisation of Chance's facial features changes from the more usual comic style to a more stylised version, and later the rest of the characters follow suit. This is done with the theory in mind that with the simpler faces, readers will invest more of their own personality to the characters as the expressions are less actualised and more symbolic, requiring more effort on behalf of the reader to deduce emotion.

Smith elaborates on this slick approach: "Chance has always been done with an eye toward animation. For myself, 'simpler' drawing requires better drawing and certainly better design. The storyboards and panel/page design are the time consumers. Once that's figured out the drawing is relatively fast. I have a sign over the drawing board that reads, 'Don't think and ink!'"

Smith's working methods for Leave It To Chance are a little unusual for the comics industry. "I work twice up (12 x 18), a size fit for grown men to work. I'd tried it earlier at Marvel and loved it but had it beaten out of me. No one else (letterers, inkers) wanted to work that size. I was halfway through Chance #1 when I realised that I'm inking myself, the lettering is on computer, I can work whatever size I want. I finished #1 at 10 x 15 and have been twice up ever since.

"Starting with copious amounts of Dr Pepper and loud, loud music, I do 2 inch by 3 inch thumbnails making whatever tweaks to the story I feel are warranted. James then reviews the thumbnails to approve, nix or expound. Enlarging by eye or projector, I draw in blue pencil. Inks are a deadweight (no thick or thin) pen outline, [done with] a Rotring Artpen, Medium or Bold. Anything too small to be drawn with the pen is too small to be drawn at all. Blacks are added with a brush, along with whatever fuss or texture, which isn't much with Chance. Issue 13 is a slight departure, being all brush.

"I find that the larger size allows me to do more drawing and less tracing in the inks. When working small (especially at the now industry standard of 8.25 x 14.1875), I get too close and lose sense of the whole. I end up tracing these short little lines. Working larger (and from looser layouts) the line stops being the result and becomes the tool with which you draw form, weight, mass, etc."

From #5, although an error saw his credits appearing only from the subsequent issue on, Smith was joined on the art chores by inker George Freeman. "George is a much better inker than I and I'll miss his contributions (he put the blacks in Chance's eyes instead of the Orphan Annie spotlights that I had). However, I can do a finished page from scratch faster than I can draw a page for someone else to ink. Broke my heart to let him go, but I'm back to inking myself."

Apart from the surface changes to the artwork initiated as a result of Freeman's inking, Smith's art has changed noticeably in the depictions of the characters during the course of the series, especially

successful current relaunch of the JSA, originally working with David Goyer. How did the two of you go about reviving a team that had been all but destroyed in the preceding decade?
JR: There was no grand design to it. We approached the task with respect for the past and a love for the characters. And while bringing about change, we tried hard not to fix what wasn't broken. The whole All-Star maxi-series of specials helped as we got a feeling for the old team, even as we were conceiving the new one.

BL: A few years before JSA launched, you had an eight part Justice Society series in development with Matt Wagner. What stalled that project and did any of the concepts planned for that impact on the current version?
JR: It was my first foray into trying to do something with the JSA. I still think it would be a great series. My life stalled the project, in that I was segueing into screenwriting full-time, getting a divorce and going through a lot of personal trauma. To do the series right would have taken an intense amount of planning. It would have been as complicated as Watchmen. I just didn't have the focus at the time.

BL: Obviously your treatment and revivals of dormant characters have gone down well, as has Kevin Smith's revival of Green Arrow. Do you think this is down to the talent of the creators involved, a more personal approach to the characters or something else...?
JR: Both factors are important, as well as an X-factor that is lacking in so many relaunches. Firstly, if the relaunch is the company's idea and the writer is brought in, it almost always fails. I do believe the relaunch has to evolve naturally from the creative heart of the writer/artist. That was certainly the case with Green Arrow and Hawkman. I'm curious to see what other character relaunches yield.

BL: Speaking of Hawkman, like your previous work on Starman and the JSA, the current relaunch has been highly popular; but, as you co-write it, how much input do you have into each issue?
JR: I'm not co-writing, I'm co-plotting. Which means I get together with Geof. We have a bite to eat or a few drinks. I throw some half-brained ideas. He goes off and does the real thinking and the real work. I'm just along for the ride. However, I should note that throughout the run there will be intermittent "*Lives Past*" stories dealing with Hawkman's prior incarnations (Nighthawk, Silent Knight, etc). I'll be writing those solo, as a way of giving Geof a break. The first is a Nighthawk western story in #7.

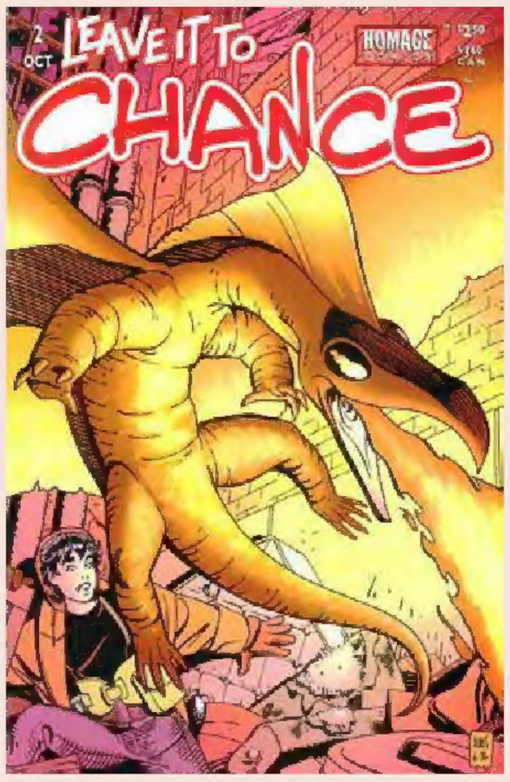
BL: You're probably still best known for your work revitalising Starman, another DC character from the Golden Age. You had been eyeing the Starman name for a long time, even when the Will Payton incarnation still had his monthly series and originally you had an idea about how to turn that title and character around. What were your plans and how did it develop into the totally different Jack Knight version?
JR: Boy, that's a trip down memory lane. I don't recall much. I wanted to make Payton more a part of the overall Starman lineage. I wanted to make him cooler. I think I had a fictional DC city in mind. Sorry, man, I forget! Jack became Starman so thoroughly so quickly that the Payton stuff fades into the ether of my memory.

BL: You were trying to land a monthly series for a long time during the period you were contemplating the possibilities with Starman and you were also then developing a Doc Samson series for Marvel. You've said that the ideas you had for the Ringmaster in that series were carried across and used for the Shade in the Starman series, but what else was retrieved? What was your concept or approach to Doc Samson as a character and as a series?
JR: I had wanted to do a darkly "mature" book, like DC's Swamp Thing, Doom Patrol, Miller's Daredevil and Batman, before Vertigo took it away from the mainstream completely. I recall that was the feel I wanted for Samson, with him with his green hair the one bright spark in a dark San Francisco. The Ringmaster was going to be the amoral supporting player who

regarding the facial characterisations. "Simplification," the artist explains, "while an ongoing process, was the intent from the beginning for just the reasons stated. I started thinking along those lines after reading Scott McLoud's Understanding Comics. As much as hardcore comics fans like a Windsor-Smith, Frazetta or Giger, the average person prefers Peanuts. The intent of Chance was to grab the average person without abandoning the fans. It's all a bit of a tightrope walk. Actually, now that I have the book in my hand, of the first seven interior shots of Chance, only one has 'proper' eyeballs. It just took a while to become the norm. I hadn't realised before how fond I was of characters looking out the corner of their eyes. Do you know how hard it is to do that when there are no eyeballs to look out of the corner of? The cartoony look is something that happened on its own. Somehow, in my attempts to simplify along the lines of *Jnny Quest* or Bravo For Adventure, I took the infamous left turn at Albuquerque and wound up at *Jhnny Bravo*."

Credits for each issue read simply "By James Robinson and Paul Smith", because the contributions from each creator are not clearly defined. "First I call James ugly, then he says my mother dresses me funny," jokes Smith. "I say that's a mean thing to tell a kid whose mother's dead, so he apologises but reminds me that he has a hundred pair of stretch socks... James is the driving force behind the stories, nearly all the stories start from him. I pitched the idea of the movie monsters walking off the screen but I didn't know why, James said 'I'll tell you why, it's a diversion'. Suddenly, we had a two-part story on our hands. My favourite 'behind the scenes story' is this. We were leaving a store signing when Jnathan Peterson, our then editor, says 'I need a cover for #11.' 'You got it,' I replied over my shoulder as I walked out the door. I then turn to James and ask, 'What's #11?'. James says 'I've been thinking about a dead hockey player', and he proceeds to spin out the story on our ride home. My only contributions were a few corrections based upon my greater sports knowledge. Issue 11 is also an example of outside contribution. James and I envisioned Quince and Hobbes as single but the fans assumed they were married. With #11, we started treating them as a couple. The process changes from issue to issue. Sometimes he'll provide highly detailed descriptions, other times it's just dialogue and as long as I hit the big points, how I get there is up to me. James will then check my thumbnails for leaks and I'll start to draw pages once I get the final dialogue. On #13, all of that went out the window. We sat down and talked it out, I took a half page of notes and drew the book from that. With #14, who knows? Maybe he'll do the thumbnails."

Both Robinson and Smith are highly respected in the comics community, producing successful work both in the mainstream and in the independent sectors of the industry, and Leave It To Chance sees both creators at the top of their game. Smith's artwork is a delight, as he is capable and confident enough to effortlessly pull off all manner of things in the scripts, from ice hockey-playing zombies, giant toad monsters, ghostly pirates and fairy armies to scenes set around the dinner table, in the sewers and at the police station. His linework has an economical grace but he is still capable of creating atmosphere through lighting and strong storytelling. It must be noted, though, that the vivid computer colouring provided by Jeremy Cox adds a lot to the visuals, creating a counterbalance of clear line and rich colour usually pulled off only



was always out for his own best interests. I recall a children's book author called Leon Garfield was going to be an influence. There was going to be an arc where Samson gets trapped in the past as an inmate of Bedlam mental hospital and a Victorian killer was going to stalk the streets of San Francisco with the Ringmaster having to play the hero and stop him. I forget what else. Alas, it was not to be. Bobbie Chase didn't feel I was "Marvel" enough.

BL: Do you and Tony Harris still intend to reunite and work on the three-issue Starman project featuring Jack's trip to Japan?
JR: I'm currently working on the bare-bones preliminary outline for the project, which is now intended to be a painted hardcover. I guess that if it can be completed/out by sometime in 2004 then it'll tie in with Starman's tenth anniversary. Boy, doesn't time fly!

BL: When Harris left Starman and Peter Snejbjerg arrived as regular artist, did you alter storylines to fit his style or did you alter the script directions for him?
JR: Neither. Peter came in at the perfect time transitionally speaking. I knew what I wanted to do and knew he'd be the man for the job. Creatively, the whole swap from Tony to Peter was relatively painless. I should also note that Steve Yeowell's contribution was a nice buffer between the two artists. I'm sorry to say I've lost touch with Steve, but I still consider him one of the greatest artists I've ever worked with.

BL: The other notable change in the Starman creative team was when Peter Tomasi replaced Archie Goodwin, who sadly died. Like many comics professionals, you had a huge amount of respect for Archie and, even after his death, he was credited in each issue of Starman as "The Guiding Light". The series never seemed to lose any of its integrity after the editorial transition, so how were you able to achieve that with not only a new editor but a new artist?
JR: By lucking into the right ones. Peter Snejbjerg is amazing. I knew he was the right choice, from day one, even though we had trouble with finding the right mesh with an inker at first. I've always had a little bit of a chip on my shoulder about how little the fan press seemed to care about Starman, none more so than in Starman's last year. I really felt Pete's work then deserved far, far more attention than it got. Peter Tomasi is amazing too. He doesn't interfere when the work is working. He fights for his creators. He has great taste. He was the suggestion of [Mike] Carlin and I couldn't have been happier. Next to Archie, Peter is the best editor I've worked with.

BL: Looking at your body of work, one of your strengths seems to be the ability to develop an affinity with your artists, and you've said that you feel very comfortable collaborating with Paul Smith, Tony Harris and Steve Yeowell. Is this as a result of your own artistic sensibilities or do you consciously write to the artists' strengths? You've mentioned that working with Chris

in the best animation.

Robinson has created an interesting relationship between Chance and her father through the miscommunication of their feelings for each other; Chance mistakes approval from her father as a sign of his love and so craves his acceptance as his successor, while he loves her so much he cannot bring himself to put her in harm's way. Robinson also creates an involving set of supporting characters with their own personalities and conflicts. Not all of Chance's adventures are at the heart of each issue - while Chance encounters the spectre of the pirate Captain Hitch, the real hardship for her is gaining acceptance from her peers at her new boarding school, and she usually fears getting caught absconding by her father more than any supernatural threat she has to handle. Part of the appeal of the series is naturally Chance herself, who is intelligent, brave and innocent, but with just the right amount of doubt, frustration and warmth to make her a sympathetic enough character for the reader to empathize with. The readers will immediately like Chance, and will feel sorry for her as they realise that her father loves her and she can't always see it; but they also know that Chance should really get the shot she deserves, and will be rooting for her because of that aspect.

As a result of the fresh, vigorous appeal of the series, Leave It To Chance soon gathered a large core of fans - but after WildStorm was bought by DC, the title's future became uncertain, despite its having won the Eisner Awards for both Best New Series and Best Publication For A Younger Audience, among other awards. The cancellation of the series was announced but was then rescinded for a further three issues to ascertain if there were sufficient sales to keep the title in publication. Delays ensued, though, and Leave It To Chance quietly slipped away.

However, as the series rights remain with the creators, Robinson and Smith have returned to Image, who published the majority of the 12-issue run, and plan to release another three regular comic-sized issues before switching to a new format. Although the series has already been partially reprinted in a collected form, new collections in the larger, hardcover European format, collecting four issues in each volume, will be released every three or four months until all fifteen issues are collected. From then on, there will be an annual release in the same format.

About the future direction of the series, both creators remain tight-lipped. But Smith hints, "Ideas? We got a million of them. The wonder of Chance is that we can do anything; mystery, sf, romance, comedy."

Bachalo was a challenge as his work was great but that he would go off on tangents from the plotted story - so is it frustrating getting art back that deviates from what you've written?
JR: All modesty aside, that's something I take great pride in, writing to an artist's strengths. I think maybe that is a factor from my wanting to be an artist myself. Regarding an artist deviating, it depends on the artist and the comic. I was the guest on Generation X, it was Chris' book, so I took the changes as a fun challenge. If the book was closer to my heart or I was on it long-term, I might feel differently.

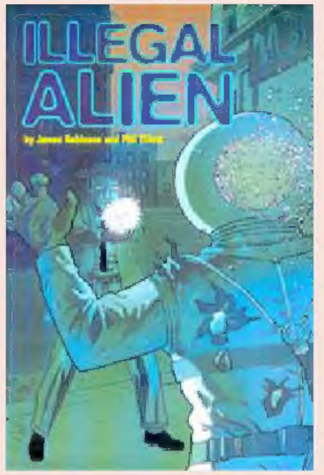
BL: More than just wanting to be an artist, at one time you were considering pursuing a career in comic art yourself. Do you still have the desire to do any artwork for comics, even if it was only a pin-up?
JR: I would like to retrain myself to the level of artistry that I could do my own storyboards. That's about it.

BL: Storyboarding brings us to your increasingly high profile in the film industry, and the project of most interest to comic fans may be the screen adaptation you're writing of Alan Moore's League of Extraordinary Gentlemen, set to star Sean Connery in the lead role of Alan Quatermain. Coming from the comics industry, where Moore is revered more than he is in movie circles, are you comfortable translating his comic scripts into a screenplay?
JR: Completely comfortable. Alan doesn't really give a shit what Hollywood does with his work, so I felt the pressure was off. Is every fan of the book going to like the film? Probably not. But I was faithful to the feel of the comic while at the same time having to produce something that Fox felt comfortable putting countless millions of dollars into, which is a knife edge to walk. The biggest challenge was keeping the spirit of the comic, while turning the characters into something actors will readily want to play. No way Griffin can be an invisible rapist...

BL: You started out going to film school to learn to direct and only fell into writing later on. Are you where you want to be in your movie career, or would you like to follow your collaborator David Goyer and make that jump to directing?
JR: I've already directed my first feature, for Lions Gate Films. It's only just completed. Entitled *Comic Book Villains*, it's a black comedy about rival comic book stores that try to get a "Mile High" type collection worth millions that an old lady has in her attic. She won't sell, and what begins as a war of one-upmanship to win her over descends into darkly humorous murder and mayhem during one crazy night. Part *Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, part *The Lady Killers*, it stars Donal Logue, Michael Rappaport, Natasha Lyonne, Cary Elwes, DJ Qualls and Eileen Brennan. It'll be out later in the year.

Apart from minor revisions on *League* and taking meetings for my next big writing project, I'm also taking meetings on my next directing gig *and* adapting Illegal Alien, a graphic novel I did with Phil Elliott many years ago, as something I'll direct too.

So am I happy with where I am in Hollywood? Not even close.



BL: So are you concentrating solely on developing your movie career or are you still looking to do more work in comics?
JR: Mainly screenwriting/directing. However, I am working on the Starman hardcover and have the loosest framework worked out for an Opal City mystery five-parter featuring Bobo Benetti, the Dibnys, Black Condor and the Shade. I'd like to always return to Opal. Oh, and I'll get around to the Shade origin special.

BL: So what are your ultimate career ambitions?
JR: Just to keep on. Never stop creatively. Never be satisfied.

HIP TO THE GROOVE

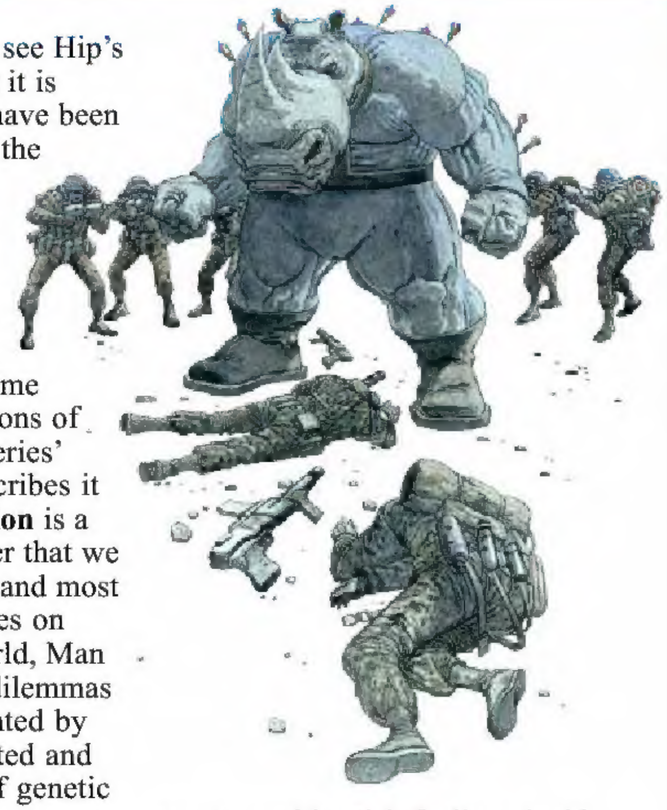
Not a hoax! Not an imaginary story! In July, Hip Flask, for years merely the advertising figurehead for Comicraft's range of commercial fonts, finally makes his comic book debut in his own 6 part series, commencing with Unnatural Selection. Jay Eales talks to the protagonists...

CREATED by Comicraft founder Richard Starkings back in 1990, Hip Flask was originally a stereotypical human private investigator character intended to appear in **Hedge Backwards**, Starkings' newspaper strip for the *El Segundo Herald*. However, as Comicraft began to take up all of his time, Hip never actually made it into print. A couple of years later, during which time Comicraft had tried unsuccessfully to negotiate for the rights to use the X-Men or WildCATs to promote their fonts, Starkings returned to his earlier creation.

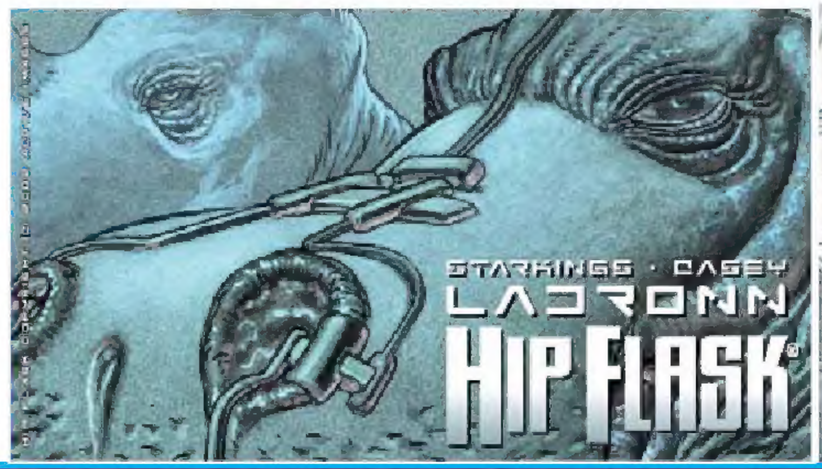
Speaking to **Borderline**, Starkings explained: "I decided to give the job to Hedge instead. But **Hedge Backwards** was such a personal strip, pretty much detailing my life and loves in California, I quickly realised that it was not an appropriate vehicle for promoting fonts such as *Clobberintime!*, *Phasesonstun* or *Comicrazy*. Hedge didn't carry a phaser and wasn't into clobbering in a big way, so I started casting around for another, more suitable salesman. While I was looking through my **Hedge Backwards** sketches, I found my original drawing of Hip Flask and proudly announced to my lovely wife, Youshka, that I'd found a character to promote our line of fonts. She liked the name, but, when I told her he was a private detective, innocuously asked me what made him different from any other PI. 'Oh, er...' I said, thinking quickly, 'He's, um... he's Hip, he's a - he's a Hippopotamus!' She liked the idea, and it stuck. I later abandoned his PI identity when I became aware of the existence of the Australian character **Hairbutt The Hippo – Private Eye**."

Hip Flask appeared in the back of various Image, Acclaim and Awesome titles, in the form of pages from imaginary comics such as **Glade Runner**, **Mystery City** and **Flask, The Barbarian**, illustrated by Brian Bolland, Jim Lee, Ian Churchill, Jae Lee and Stephen Platt. Later, Comicraft created a **Sixty Years Of Hip Flask** mockumentary for their website, [*http://www.hipflask.com/60_years/index.html*], leading to numerous calls from comics fans trying to track down back issues. Starkings hopes that the elaborate hoax around Hip Flask's past won't affect his future when Diamond's *Previews* solicits his latest appearance in May.

Unlike other cartoon and comic book hippo characters, **Hip Flask** is not your typical "funny animal", but rather a tragic hero. Starkings believes that readers will be in for a big surprise when they see Hip's origin story and find that it is nothing like they might have been expecting. The theme of the series is one of man's inhumanity to man - and this overwhelming impulse we have as a species to explore beyond the limits of things, whether that be time and space, or the limitations of the physical body. The series' artist, José Ladronn, describes it thus: "**Unnatural Selection** is a book to help us remember that we are now the most fragile and most easily manipulated species on Earth. In Hip Flask's world, Man is dealing with the new dilemmas and consequences presented by advances in the uninhibited and senseless restructuring of genetic material.

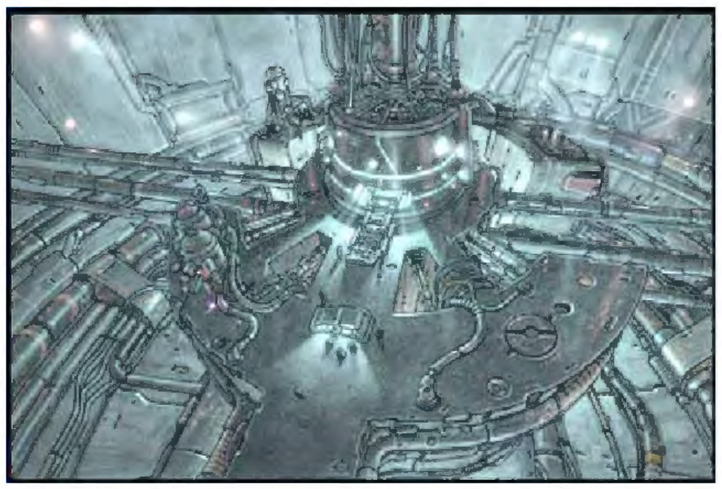


"Hip Flask, Obadiah Horn and the rest of the 'Elephantmen' live on the edge of a society to which they don't belong, and which doesn't belong to them. The internal values of these 'Unhumans' are very different to the humans with whom they must live. They are more passionate and tortured, they live their days fighting amongst themselves and they are forced to keep their most savage and brutish feelings inside. Their world is not filled with the fresh air their ancestors breathed; it is a plastic and steel jungle drenched in acid rain. Nevertheless, Hip Flask has soul, charm and the deep desire to be at peace with himself. In many ways, he is far more human than any human. He was pulled from a cold and crude, scary and controlled scientific society, with unnatural desires, to a new and more deadly



environment: Mystery City. The city itself is now the hunter, waiting to trap and devour anyone or any creature that places a foot wrong."

The storyline behind **Hip Flask: Unnatural Selection** came to Starkings after reading an article in *Time* a couple of years ago. It related how scientists had impregnated a human embryo with the sperm of a cow. The process was terminated, but it was unclear as to whether at any point a cow foetus had been growing within a human being. This got Starkings' creative juices flowing. Initially conceived as a four page black and white wash strip for an ashcan, when artist Ladronn came aboard the project it developed further. Starkings enthused about his collaborators, Ladronn and scripter Joe Casey: "Ladronn is an artist way ahead of his time, who has yet to find due recognition for his work. He is an ideal collaborator, and he has drawn the story of Hip Flask out of me, as well as for me. I learn from him on a daily basis, and the skills he has brought to Hip Flask have helped give the character a context and credibility which I could not have found alone. Ladronn's gorgeous full colour work is an incredible blend of watercolor and computer enhancement. Joe's script has really picked up on the bleaker, darker and disturbing aspects of Hip's origin."



Hip Flask: Unnatural Selection will be available from July 17th with four alternative covers by Joe Madureira, J. Scott Campbell, Ian Churchill and Ladronn, priced at US$2.99, with 32 full colour pages and no adverts.

MOONLIGHT BECOMES YOU

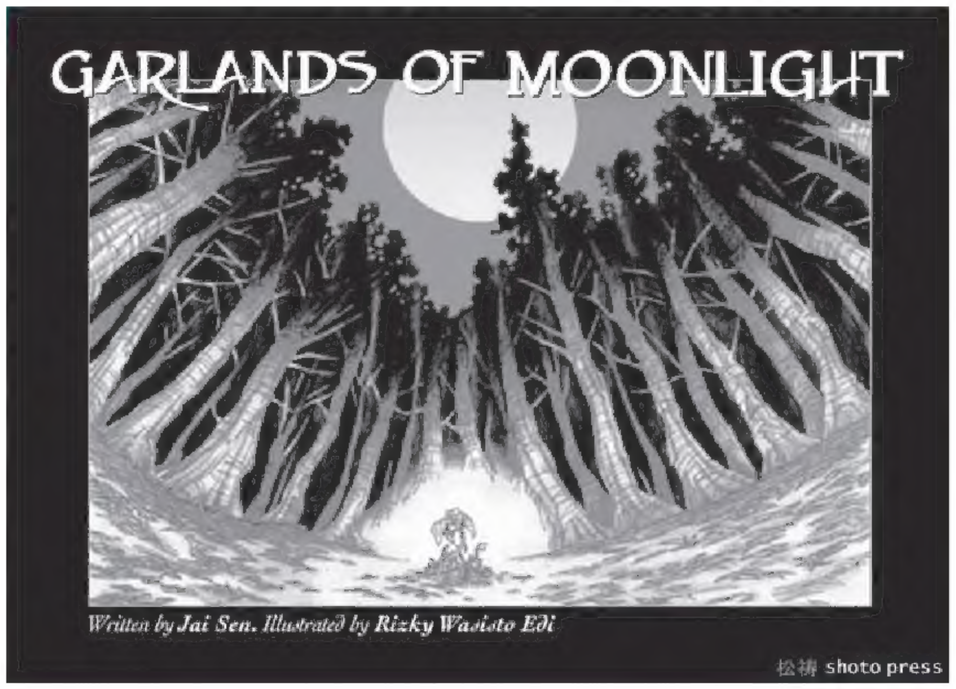
Jai Sen's first foray into the comics world has won his comic the 2002 Xeric Foundation Award. Borderline's Jay Eales took the opportunity to find out more about this rising star...

SILENT and merciless, a creature of darkness has come to prey on an island village. Babies vanish, mothers are murdered, and the threat of evil grows with each passing night. The village becomes a battleground as the onrush of the twentieth century clashes with tradition – and the restless spirits of the island's mythical past...

Garlands Of Moonlight, the first title from writer/publisher Jai Sen and illustrator Rizky Wasisto Edi, has just been honoured with a Xeric Foundation Award 2002. The Foundation [*www.xericfoundation.com*] was set up by **Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles** and **Planet Racers** creator Peter Laird, and exists to promote outstanding small press comics work and non-profit organizations within the United States and Canada. Since their inception in 1992, Xeric awards have been received by creators such as Jason Lutes (**Jar Of Fools**), Tom Hart (**Hutch Owen's Working Hard**), Jessica Abel (**Artbabe**), Linda Medley (**Castle Waiting**), Troy Little (**Chiaroscuro**) and Rachel Hartman (**Amy Unbounded: Belondweg Blossoming**). The Award provides funding for printing; just as importantly, it brings recognition and a seal of quality for what might well be an unknown quantity in a sea of new titles vying for the buyers' attention.

The inspiration for the story comes from a Malay legend of an evil vampiric spirit. In the original tale, a young woman on the brink of death during childbirth makes a pact with evil spirits in order to continue living. Their gift comes with a terrible price, as all the sweet innocence possessed by the girl becomes corrupted, and she grows to relish the terrible acts that the spirits make her commit. Able to create illusions, the creature masquerades as an ordinary person in order to maintain a constant supply of fresh victims.

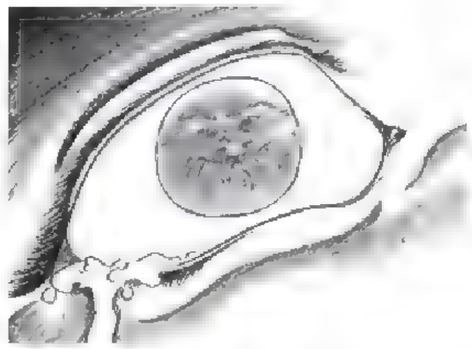
Born in India to a Bengali father and American mother of German ancestry, brought up in Indonesia and now shuttling back and forth between Tokyo and the United States, Sen grew up on a diet of Indian religious comics and Hergé's **Tintin**, which remain favourites of his to this day alongside later influences such as Neil Gaiman, Alan Moore and Arthur C. Clarke. Having been a latecomer to works like **The Sandman**, in book form rather than the original comics, has probably directed Sen's approach to storytelling towards longer forms rather than part-works. **Garlands** touches upon some themes about the idea of community and being an outsider,



and how people act under different degrees of threat. **Garlands Of Moonlight** is set at the turn of the 20th century in order to amplify one of the themes Sen found in abundance during his time in Indonesia - a fundamental dichotomy between a pervasive mysticism and the encroachment of the modern age.

Speaking exclusively to **Borderline**, Sen explained how his Shoto Press imprint [*www.shotopress.com*] came to be: "I've worked in a number of careers, all of them somehow related to acquiring skills I would need in order to create my own comics, since I've known that this is what I want to do since I was in school. I've been a journalist, graphic designer, and most recently, worked in web development, which taught me how to pull off big projects with large, spread-out, multidisciplinary teams. I got into web development just as the boom started, and by the time the bubble was about to burst (in 2000), I had done pretty well for myself. I started as a producer, which is basically a project team leader, and worked my way through to strategy. This included a stint at Razorfish, which at the time was the hippest place to be if you were in that industry. By the end of it, I had my own small consulting practice with some pretty major clients; I then sold my small practice and client list to a larger technology company. I stuck around for a while to transition my clients to the larger firm, but then, seeing the handwriting on the wall and realizing that I didn't need to build up more of a nest egg to really get this thing started, basically retired and began my new career in writing. All the resources that I built up from working in other careers were used to create and fund Shoto Press. If I had to distil Shoto Press down to its essence, I would say that it's about sincerity. Sincerity is a quality that's missing in so much of what reaches the reader these days, and it's a quality I prize above all else."

Shoto Press books will be difficult to miss on the comic shelves, due to Sen's desire to let each book be published in the most appropriate format, rather than settling for the industry default size. If that means printing in a horizontal form in order to emulate the look of antique photo albums, so be it. A later project is intended to be 11" x 2", with the shorter edge as the spine, allowing for huge double splash pages. Black and white, full colour, black and silver duotone and even metallic



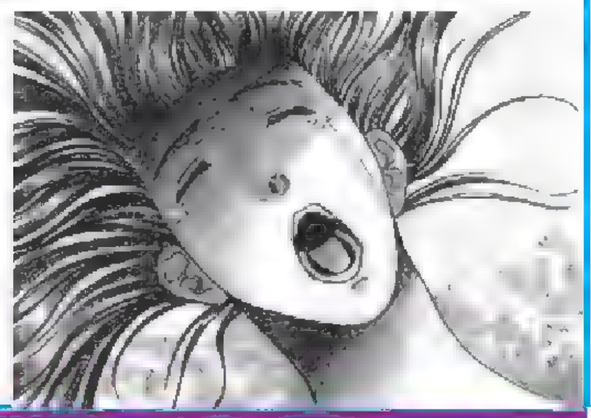
inks where they might enhance the storytelling, and a great deal of attention given to high production values, will surely mark these books out from the pack.

As Sen said: "I was cautioned that comics retailers wouldn't tolerate things that didn't fit properly on their shelves, and if I broke certain inviolable rules, I would never have a chance to get my work into the hands of the public. I appreciated the advice, but it didn't sit well with me, so I opened the subject up to debate, and solicited opinions from a variety of readers, publishers (both small press and otherwise), retailers, and so on. By the end of it, I had nearly a hundred e-mails, of which only four spoke out against the idea of doing things in unusual formats. The consensus seemed to be that comics retailers will be comics retailers, and they shouldn't be the deciding factor behind such an important creative decision of what format will best frame a story.

"In the end, this whole exercise reminded me why I set out to start a publishing imprint of my own. I want to create things as I envision them. The idea of handing my work over to someone so that it can be "adjusted" to work better commercially, or be illustrated by people I don't know, has always been daunting for me. I decide on a format and printing techniques based on what feels best for the story, and this is to serve the reader by enhancing and supporting the story. The market is so polarized by an assumption that experim-entation isn't possible, or that it's somehow dangerous. All of the readers who weighed in on the format issue said they are intrigued by unusual formats, and some went so far as to say that they wished more people were brave enough to experiment. (Of course, the format is the least of the innovations that I hope I'm able to get away with, not the least of which being some of the subject matter I'm choosing.)"

Future Shoto Press publications include a 308 page graphic novel currently being illustrated in Tokyo by Japanese artists Kanako Kiso, Keisuke Shimizu and Shino Yotsumoto, tentatively scheduled for August publication. Shoto Press will be taking a preview book to the San Diego Comicon. After comes the tale of the heir to a tobacco empire who develops a conscience… of sorts, featuring mysterious cults, private investigators and rum goings-on galore, between the 1970s and the near future of 2035. This will be around 100 pages and illustrated by a colleague of **Garlands** artist Rizky Wasisto Edi, fellow Indonesian Sigit Prakosa. Beyond that, a sequel to **Garlands** in the same length and format is promised.

Garlands Of Moonlight, Shoto Press ISBN: 0-9717564-0-6, 86 black/silver duotone pages, 7" x 5" (17.8cm x 12.7cm), will be published in summer 2002, for the paltry sum of US$4.59. It will be available from comic shops, high street and online bookstores.



TERMINAL OBSESSIONS

Palmiotti, Gray and Sais fly in the face of death with a new series about a dying man. Borderline's Mike Sivier caught up with the ever-ebullient Jimmy Palmiotti and eager newcomer Justin Gray, and talked to them about this intriguing new DC series...

WHAT would you do if you knew you had only one year to live?

Would you go crazy? Live life on the edge? Do things you would never do?

Or would you make the same choice as Preston Kills - try to find a way to accept your death sentence, live a simple kind of life?

All that changes when Preston meets Mickey - an intelligent, incredibly sexy older woman - and so begins **21 Down**, a new series by Justin Gray and Jimmy Palmiotti, with pencil art by Jesus Sais, debuting this July in **Gen 13** #0.

Preston's priorities shift dramatically when Mickey presents him with the idea that he might be able to save himself - turning his world upside down.

Self preservation will make people do some crazy things and, for Preston, facing a death sentence is going to challenge his sense of morality. He has a choice to make: take the easy path and wait for death, or get out there and try to make something happen even if it means failure.

Well, what do *you* think he decides?

Borderline spoke to series creators Justin Gray and Jimmy Palmiotti, who is also providing inks for the title, about its original premise and its place in the contracting American comics market.

Jimmy Palmiotti: We wanted to look at what makes a hero or a villain besides a funny suit and an over-inflated sense of justice. There are a lot of grey areas in life; good people do bad things and so on. As we saw with the events of September 11, saving one person is a huge accomplishment and worthy of the title "hero". In 21Down, we're trying to develop a more complex and subtle view of how a comicbook works.

The audience for comicbooks has grown up, matured on its own, and really a lot of the old rules do not apply anymore. People's tastes change and the industry needs to change with them. 21Down is a book that questions a lot of the everyday ins and outs of life, with an unusual story wrapped around it.

Borderline: What got you and Justin Gray started on 21 Down?

JP: I would say for the past couple of years Justin and I have been working on a number of projects outside comics, and when Bob Harras, now working for WildStorm, approached us about creating an idea, Justin and I ran with 21 Down. We related to this guy and felt it was a nice companion to the Gen 13 title that Chris [Claremont] is working on.

BL: *Was Jesus Sais in from the start or was he hired in?*

JP: Jesus Siaz was our first pick for the artist... There were a few more famous guys, but we needed someone who was hungry to get his work out there, and this guy was getting better every page. I am currently inking him on Midnight Mass for Vertigo, then on to 21 Down right after. We like him so much, we are using his talent on a number of projects. Jesus does some really amazing character sketches and designs, and really has a great way of keeping the storytelling interesting to the viewer. I am sooo happy with his work so far.

BL: *Is this a limited series or is it open-ended?*

JP: The book is an ongoing series for as long as people keep buying it. Our

main characters are on the clock, but I hope with enough interest and fan support, we can keep it going for a while. Justin and I have already laid out more than half a year's worth of storylines and such.

I personally have a short attention span with a lot of books I read these days, so when writing 21 Down, we are making sure we flesh ideas and characters out quickly and keep it really interesting. My attention span is so short, I forgot the question already (laughs).

BL: *It seems a more cerebral type of story than your usual US comicbook fare. Are you trying to expand the frontiers a little? Is it more about characters and attitudes than action?*
Justin Gray: With 21 Down, and this is true of all our collaborative efforts, we want to create a very cinematic atmosphere through which to tell character-driven stories. It doesn't matter how cool the costume is or how interesting the powers are, if you don't have well-developed characters then you're wasting your time. We're not purposefully trying to come up with a book designed to expand the frontiers, but we do have different ideas about what kinds of stories we want to tell. Those stories tend to fall outside the realm of straight superhero action.

JP: WildStorm has so much variety, it's hard to answer a blanket statement like that... All the Alan Moore titles, the Asian-influenced ones, the Jim Lee creations... There is a lot of great stuff coming out of there, and we think we got our little corner covered pretty well with 21 Down and The Resistance. We are both happy they have taken us in with open arms... Okay, the ass-kissing session is over; you can stop puking now.

BL: *Do any of the creators have personal experience of people in a similar situation to Preston Kills?*
JG: I don't know any writer that doesn't incorporate his or her

personal experiences into their work. We've all been touched by death, some more closely than others. The universal truth at the core of 21 Down is that we're all going to die sooner or later; the difference is what we do with our lives. Do you dwell on it and live in fear, or do you accept that it's inevitable and just enjoy what you have? At some point everyone answers that question in his or her own way.

JP: The two main characters are a 20 year old guy and a woman in her early thirties... One of these I was; the other I had (laughs). Actually, Mickey is an easier write for me, because she is more comfortable in her skin and she has drive and ambition, and is on a mission, which I feel like each and every day. Preston has a ton of fear, depression and wonder about him that keeps him sane while the world around him starts to slip away.

I probably would think in order to write anything, you have to put yourself in the shoes of the characters and run with it. The thing I love about the book is that, on the outside, they are very different characters, and inside they both have major issues.

BL: *What sort of readership do you see the series getting, since it's not the usual superhero stuff - by which I mean, what kind of people do you envision reading this? The subject matter suggests it's an attempt to expand comics' readership and I'm wondering how you're going to try to draw new readers in.*
JG: What we want and what we get are two different things. We'd love to see the same sort of appreciation and social acceptance that the European and Japanese markets have toward non-superhero comicbooks. Unfortunately, the American market is totally different. Obviously we hope that 21Down is the sort of book that appeals to a broad range of people - and that includes the much sought after female readers. The problem is and always has been getting the books into their hands.

The subject matter in 21 Down is universal; it deals with life, death, love, loss, lust and the whole gamut of experiences that make it worth living. We'd like to draw new readers in by getting exposure outside of the industry pool, but the best way we can do that is by creating a quality product that strikes an emotional chord with people. Beyond that it's up to the industry leaders, marketing departments and executives to push comics into the mainstream.

JP: This is a superhero book with a different slant to it; less about powers, more about affairs of the heart and brain. There are no spandex fruits running around this title, unless it starts to bomb - then Batman and Wonder Woman will be motelling it on a double-page splash to pick up sales... God, I wish I could do that! I say, give it a chance and judge for yourself. We've even got a preview of the series running in the back of the Gen 13 #0 13-cent book, hitting soon - so you've really got nothing to lose!

JIMMY P SPEAKS

JIMMY Palmiotti *(self-portrait below)* has been in the business for a decade now, working on almost every major title out there at one time or another. Together with Joe Quesada (now Editor-in-Chief at Marvel Comics) he co-created Event Comics and the Marvel Knights imprint.

Borderline asked Jimmy for his thoughts on the American industry and how to improve it. This is what he said:

"What a wonderful and healthy business we would have if we took a lesson or two from those wacky Europeans and started some changes in our publishing.

"The American market is driven by greed and envy... How else would you explain each company having the need to put out 60 titles and trying to add many more in the next year or so?

"No-one, including the fans, is going to make out well with this.

"We are selling the same books to the same small group of people. All publishers are guilty of this and need to understand the core of their buying audience. Comics buyers do not have an endless supply of money, and these books are not getting to new audiences, so I personally think the time has come for changes in our industry's appearance.

"We can no longer just create conventional superheroes only; we need variety like Vertigo and the Max line, and we need to support the independents, where the books are driven by ideas and not greed.

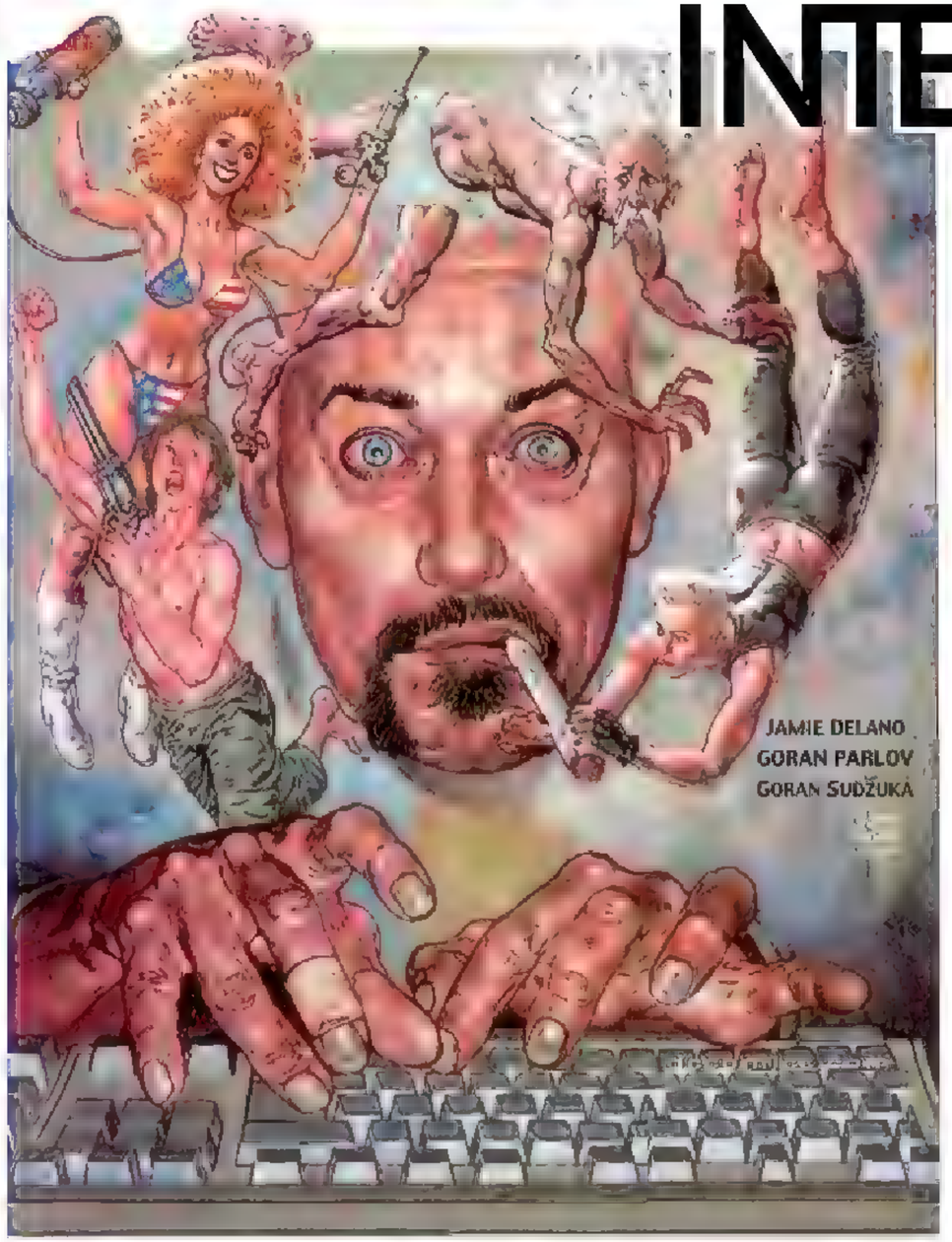
"How many different Superman and X-Men books do we really need to shove down the public's throat?* Every time a fan buys another spinoff of a popular book, it takes away more money from the retailer's pool to try something new... Do the math.

"Unless we mature, this business is only going to be about caped superheroes. There's nothing wrong with those when done right, but we need to get more genre books out there to new readers, women and young people.

"Wow... Where did that come from?"

*Note to people on the outside world: Now, because of that comment, I will be banned from working on both titles... maybe.

THE JAMIE DELANO INTERVIEW



JUST after the publication of the finale to Outlaw Nation, his most recent monthly series, Borderline's Jay Eales spoke to writer Jamie Delano about his career.

Borderline: One more time, for the latecomers, can you explain how you came to find yourself writing for a living?

Jamie Delano: Call it a lucky break. In 1983, at the age of 29, I was earning a meagre crust aimlessly trundling a taxi around Northampton in the dead of night, thinking that sooner or later I would have to stub out my spliff and get down to some serious writing. Alan Moore - may his snake god reward him for it - got my lazy arse moving, introducing me to an editor at Marvel UK who invited me to try out writing short prose stories featuring a character called Nightraven - or Night Raven, I can never remember which. Somehow I managed to keep my plates spinning (and the spliff smouldering) for the next, uh, 19 years. Christ! Is that the time already?

BL: Why are you working in comics, rather than another form?

JD: Opportunity, laziness, enjoyment of collaborative creativity.

BL: How do you approach the business of writing? Are you methodical, using detailed plans, or more of a fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants writer?
JD: When it comes to writing (and most other areas of my life, too) my middle name is definitely "Biggles". I am almost pathological in my refusal to think strategically. Of course, I generally write synopses, and plot stories in order to convince an editor that there is a story to be told, but almost invariably fail to follow this battle plan once the keyboard action starts. However detailed, a plot is rarely more than a scarcely glimpsed ghost of a story, a device to enable access to the territory in which the story really lives. Other writers doubtless differ in their approach, setting out perhaps to control their imaginary world and deliver it, fully formed and unassailable, to their reader. Following that model would kill the job for me. The (considerable) energy required to get me to the keyboard is only aroused through the anticipation of discovery. I might know the story's rough destination when I start out, but discovering by what devious course I will get there, and the exact detail of that finally achieved destination, are the mysteries that excite and incite me enough to keep me travelling hopefully.

BL: On a related note, I guess - some writers find the panic of an approaching deadline spurs them into action to produce their best work. In your case, are deadlines something to be dreaded, a catalyst, or just a marker for the next paycheque?
JD: Deadlines have largely been irrelevant in my career. The imperative of an exhausted bank account usually gets my reluctant fingers dancing on the keyboard long before any editor is moved to start yelling down the phone. On the odd occasion that a temporary budget surplus tempts idleness, the knowledge that comics is a collaborative medium and that nobody works without a script will gently prick me into action. Panic, however generated, is not conducive to creativity in my experience.

BL: What would you say are the recurring themes to be found in your work?
JD: A question that a critic or psychoanalyst might more perceptively answer, I suspect. But off the top of my head: protagonists who exhibit an irritating refusal to judge, or an inability to act with decision or authority; the flawed responses of honest and moral individuals confused and terrorised by a fundamentally Darwinian world; scarily smart-mouthed kids; a black humour that sees the funny side of despair, and maybe a certain antipathy toward religion and the dogmatically religious.

BL: Movie adaptations of comics - bad idea, or take the money and run?
JD: Why not? A good story is a good story - comic, book, or original - success or failure lies in the hands of the adaptors and their ability to enhance the qualities of the story that best suit their medium. I recently completed a screenplay version of Hell Eternal: it turned out to be the same emotional and political story as the comic, but told through markedly different scenes and dramatic structure. Probably short self-contained comics stories stand more chance of satisfactory screen realisation than series, such as Batman, with all their attendant origin and continuity baggage, though.

BL: With the Hell Eternal *screenplay in the bag, how does your experience of the film industry compare with the comics industry, so far?*
JD: Bear in mind that my experience is by no means broad. Much more money is involved in the creation of a movie than of a comic book, and there are necessarily far fewer of them that see the light of production, so there is much more focus on the avoidance of "failure" and a disinclination towards risk. Finance for further production is often dependent on the initial impact of a screenplay, so producers pay a lot of attention to developing a presentation that is, in their opinion, strong enough to be bankable. A screenplay writer cannot afford to be too precious about his art if he wants to see his tiny name-check on the credit roll of an eventual movie. That's not to say that comics are "second rate" in any way, but that their diversity and multiplicity allow

more opportunity for experiment and idiosyncrasy.

Otherwise, there are more similarities than differences. Both film and comics are collaborative, ultimately visual media that originate in some poor writer's agonised interaction with a terrifyingly blank word-processor screen.

BL: How much has Hell Eternal changed in the retelling for the screen?
JD: Considerably. The heavy use of the main protagonist's narrative voice to provide exposition and psychological insight in the original comic was a device inappropriate to film, so the scenes from the lives of the characters that are witnessed in the movie are chosen to demonstrate rather than describe their worldviews and personal realities, with the result that the progression of the screenplay version of the story bears little similarity to that of the comic. But the characters and their motivations remain pretty constant, and both stories end in roughly the same place.

BL: What would you say are the advantages of working in the medium of comics as opposed to other forms?
JD: The eclecticism of comics has always appealed to me. The cross-genre diversity of the medium has so far provided me a forum to reach an audience that other media might have constrained. But my (commercial) experience of other forms of creative expression is too limited to offer a definitive comparison. This may change. The apparent shrinking of the audience for comics, and a gradual limiting of the scope for "experimentation", particularly in the mainstream, is steadily encouraging me to broaden my range.

BL: A rumour was recently reported on Ananova about casting for the Hell Eternal *movie, citing Sadie Frost, Ewen Bremner and James Frain in the frame. Is there any truth to it?*
JD: As far as I and the couple of producers I have mentioned it to are concerned, there is no truth in the report as regards casting. The storyline of the movie described bears passing resemblance to the screenplay version of Hell Eternal as it currently exists, but also differs in significant detail, mentioning Washington DC as a prime location, which is not the case with my story. I suspect someone has conflated snippets of information on two different movies that may currently be in development and Ananova neglected to check their source.

BL: Do you have any unfulfilled ambitions in comics?
JD: Ten minutes thinking about this question: finally it occurs to me the answer must be no. Not that there's not stuff I still want to do - like write a non-genre graphic novel which reaches an audience off the comics campus, or something truly funny - but the word "ambition" always kind of sticks in my throat... suggests an unhealthy kind of need. But then where would the world be if its progress was in the hands of lackadaisical types like me?

BL: Is there a character or series that you wish you'd created?
JD: No, not really. Zippy The Pinhead maybe, if you push me, but I'm generally happy with my own creations.

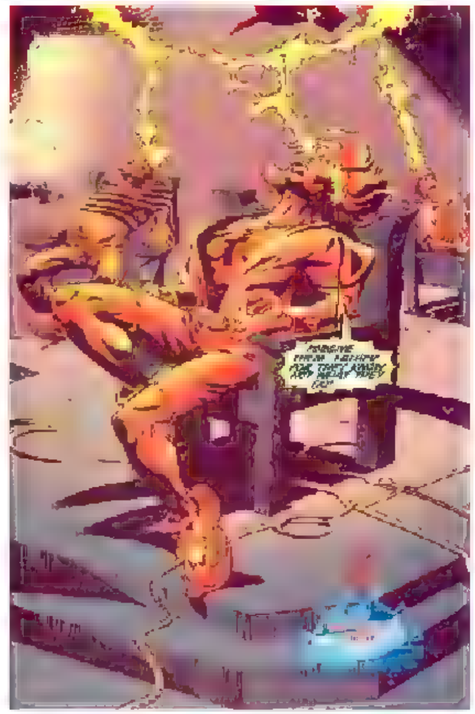
BL: Recommend a comic we should be reading.
JD: I can't. I'm not reading any myself at the moment: trying to clear my head for new projects after three years caught up in the chaos of Outlaw Nation.

BL: Do you have any unfulfilled ambitions outside comics?
JD: In common with many middle aged men I have a long list of vague regrets for things undone; e.g. learning to speak Spanish properly, driving the U.S. coast-to-coast, sorting out a pension, becoming a benevolent world dictator. But on the whole I'm reasonably fulfilled.

BL: What's the oddest day job you've ever had?
JD: Other than writing comics for a living, I guess driving cabs got pretty weird from time to time.

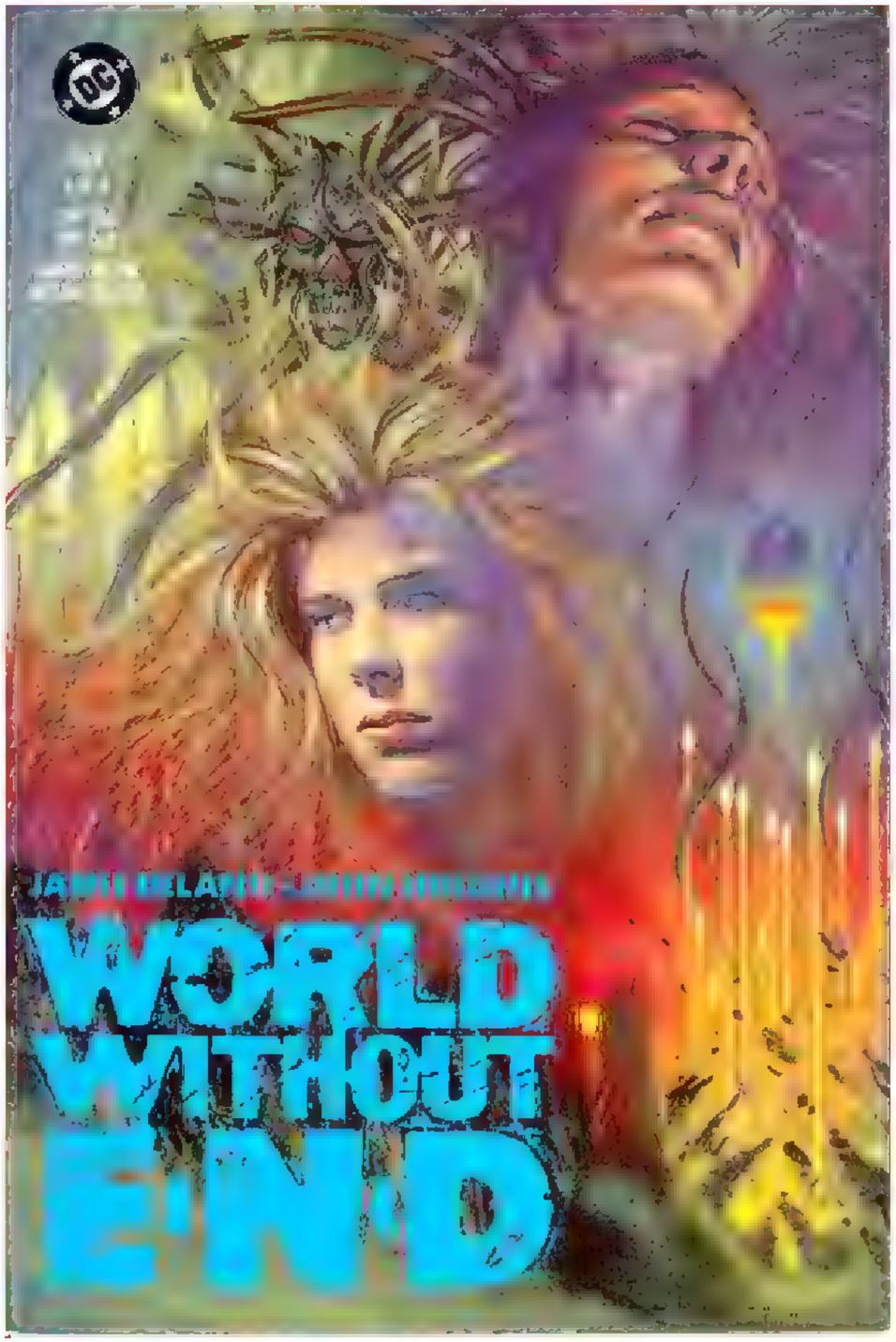
BL: Have you ever considered taking the filthy lucre of soap opera scriptwriting, like fellow Vertigo alumni Peter Milligan and Art Young?
JD: Never been asked: but as one who experiences an adverse physical reaction (skin-crawling claustrophobia) at the sound even of the theme music to *Eastenders* or *Brookside*, let alone the tediously argumentative regional accents that follow, I am certain the answer would be "No". But if something like *The Sopranos* can be considered soap opera, I'd have to reconsider.

BL: If you were able to ban one question from all future interviews, what would that question be?
JD: Where do you get your inspiration? / How do you think up your stories?



BL: Going back to some of your earlier work, on Captain Britain, what sort of research did you do to get up to speed with that? Somehow I can't see you as being much of a Marvel Zombie.
JD: It's true that when I began work in comics my experience with the medium as a reader was limited largely to Seventies underground comix. As I remember, I didn't do a whole lot of research into the Marvel "universe". I read what Moore and Alan Davis had done with Captain Britain and combined that with my appreciation of the science fiction genre, then relied on my perception of the protagonists to bring some stories to light.

BL: I presume that you're blissfully unaware of the atrocities perpetrated upon poor Brian Braddock in the



time since you stopped writing Captain Britain?
JD: Totally ignorant.

BL: Was there a lot of politics flying about at Marvel during your tenure on CB? By that, I mean in terms of not being able to use Alan Moore-created characters, such as The Special Executive and the Fury? That sort of thing.
JD: I'm sure there must have been, but it was a long time ago now, and I was always too engaged in the work to pay attention.

BL: From time to time, my inner fanboy gets the better of me, and I idly wish for you or Alan Moore to ride in like the cavalry and make Captain Britain worth reading again... ridiculous as I'm sure that sounds! I certainly think that it would be interesting to read the sort of Captain Britain stories that you'd tell nowadays.
JD: Can't speak for Moore, but I doubt I'll be down that road again. Some things are best left in their own time.

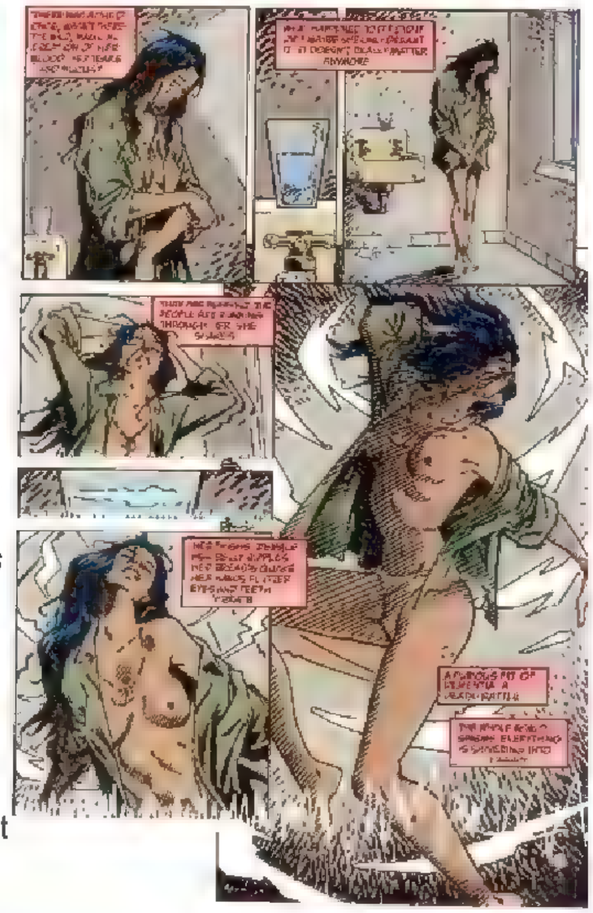
BL: In House Of Cards, you were able to go back to explore the character of Night Raven, and likewise with John Constantine in The Horrorist and Hellblazer: Bad Blood. Is there any desire to revisit any of your other past works?
JD: Both Night Raven and Constantine have an enduring resonance for me, largely because my relationships with them are long-standing, I guess. But while I could contemplate bringing Night Raven back in comics form, and maybe revisiting Constantine in a prose "dime novel" format perhaps, most of my "creator-owned" work is self-contained and complete. Animal Man certainly doesn't tug nostalgically. I always thought 2020 Visions was an under-exploited concept, though - the cohesive near-future scenario of that series could have served to frame many more than the four three-part speculative stories that ultimately constituted it.

BL: Do you think that you might return to the setting of your 2020 Visions series?
JD: Probably not to that specific setting: but the near future offers a useful perspective on the trends of the present.

BL: I've always wondered if the Hellblazer story The Fear Machine *took any inspiration from a novel called Ghost Train by Stephen Laws. I read them both at around the same time, and wondered if one might have influenced the other, or if it was a case of synchronicity at work.*
JD: Yeah, Stephen Laws wondered the same thing when I met him around the time the stories were published. I'd never seen his book and I still haven't read it, so I don't really know the extent of the two stories' similarity. Apparently both feature trains supernaturally affected due to tracks being laid on the paths of ley-lines, but in the case of *The Fear Machine*, this element was only peripheral to the story.

BL: In John Higgins' self-published Razorjack, containing the first part of a reprinting of World Without End, you wrote an introduction explaining that you turned down the opportunity to do a prestige format Batman book in order to do WWE. Since WWE didn't quite achieve the sales figures of something like Arkham Asylum, were you more eager to grasp the opportunity when Batman: Man-Bat presented itself?
JD: The Man-Bat story that I originally proposed did not include a role for Batman, but ultimately the temptation to add sales and value to the project by including the big box-office Dark Knight proved a temptation impossible to resist. Plus, John Bolton really wanted a chance to paint his conception of The Batman, and I wanted John to work on my book. As it transpired, however, unavoidable impediments to production delayed the book's final appearance by some four or five years, and by the time it was out there, the Batman gravy train was idling in the sidings somewhere. So serve me right for being greedy. Not that I didn't enjoy fooling with that caped psychopath a little.

BL: It is rumoured that you were approached to pitch for the Buffy The Vampire Slayer comic series when that was gearing up. Is that right?
JD: Not true. Dark Horse asked for a



WHAT YOU THINKIN', ALEX?
I WAS THINKIN' ABOUT MY KID, JACKIE.
THIRTY-SEVEN GODDAMN YEARS SINCE HER MOTHER TOOK HER HOME TO GEORGIA WENT FOR THANKS-GIVING, 1983.
ALWAYS KINDA THOUGHT SHE'D TRY AN' TRACK ME DOWN, ONE DAY..
WHY WOULD SHE, WHEN YOU DUMPED HER AN' HER CUTE-AS-A-BUTTON MOM TO SCREW-UP YOUR LIFE WITH A SLEAZY FUCK HEAD BITCH LIKE ME?
HEY.. YOU WERE WORTH EVERY MISERABLE, LONELY HOUR
DON'T SAY THAT, ALEX.. MAKES ME FEEL
OH CHRIST... I'M FUCKIN' GOMIN' ON AGAIN
OKAY... I'M HERE I GOT YOU
GO FUCKIN' LON-LIFE...
NO, BABE... THAT'S ONE THING YOU'LL NEVER BE
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proposal for a comics version of *Millennium*, but I never really got wholeheartedly behind the concept and it didn't work out.

BL: Which project has been the most rewarding for you financially, and which creatively?
JD: I've never really done the maths. An eventual Hell Eternal movie would put that work at number one financially by far. I have a small residual royalty in Hellblazer and so continue to leech a few dollars a month from the labours of others and the merchandising associated with their success. And Batman: Man-Bat still sells a couple of copies a year. Not much of my other work has made it into TPB collections, so earnings from it are long since spent.

Creatively, I am probably proudest of: 2020 Visions; Hell Eternal; Night Raven: House of Cards; and the ill-starred Outlaw Nation, (with a smattering of individual Hellblazer stories such as *The Family Man*, *Dead-boy's Heart*, [and] *Another Part of Hell*).

BL: How long does it generally take you to develop a new series or story proposal, (if that isn't a "how long is a piece of string" question)?
JD: Depends on the project and the editorial bureaucracy of the company involved. It probably averages out at around 12-18 months from conception, through proposal, to agreement to proceed.

BL: In general, do you prefer the ongoing format or shorter self-contained stories?
JD: Ongoing series are easier to write, once the original scenario has been established, but the discipline of a self-contained story is probably beneficial, and forces the focusing of ideas.

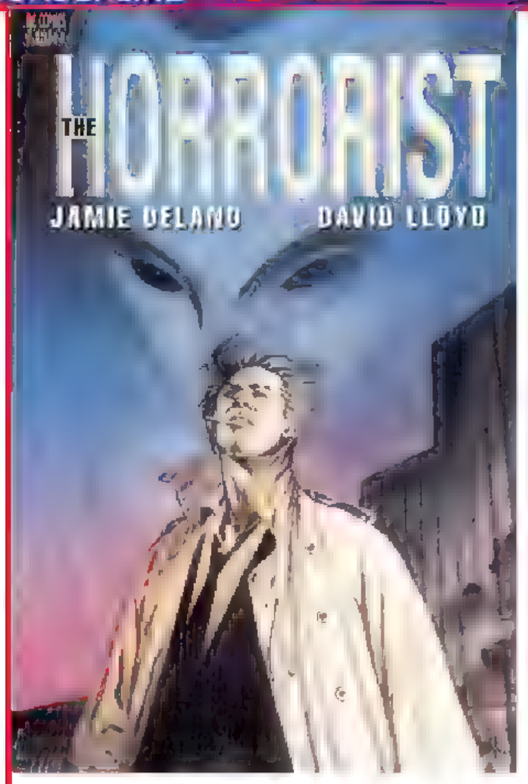
BL: What do your family think about your writing? Do you let them see what you're working on before it's finished, and are they interested if you do?
JD: My family has never exhibited much interest in comics beyond a mild curiosity about just what it is I do shut away in my dim-lit chamber of toxic fumes that leaves me so weird and distant when I emerge. Fortunately, perhaps, for their sanity - and mine - the other family members have never succumbed to infection by The Word, choosing other outlets for their creativity. My partner, Sue Judd, is a potter, handcrafting original ceramics, which she sells through a local cooperative gallery. Our daughter is a painter and graphic designer, and our youngest son is a DJ and music technology student. Our elder son has a more pragmatic bent, but he's an artist with a torque wrench.

BL: For a while, you lived on a boat, didn't you? How did that impact on your writing?
JD: The boat was a work environment more than a home - a mobile, floating writer's garden-shed, somewhere to get out of the house to each day to work, rather than just shuffling blearily from breakfast table to study. A wood-burning stove, fresh air, wildlife - primitive notebook computer and a wildly expensive 12-volt on-board cell-phone system... I'm feeling nostalgic already. But suddenly, around 1995, the primitive notebook wasn't enough. It seemed I needed a monstrous desktop PC, with fax and email capability, and sprawling acres of grey plastic peripherals requiring mega amps of 240 volt electricity to power them, in order to practice my craft - so it was back to the study, snared by the "liberating" new technology.

Now you've got me thinking. I still own the boat: maybe I should invest in a laptop and slip my moorings for a while, run up the Jolly Roger and haunt the inland waterways of Britain again.

But then I'm forgetting the winter, and the Year Of the Big Flood, which saw me drown my car in an icy torrent, escaping to wade across flooded fields with computer held high above my head and spend three days aboard, like a lonely Noah, waiting for the waters to subside.

BL: What is an average working day like?
JD: On a "good" working day, I will wake around 7:30 am, doze for a while listening to the daily news bulletins from hell on the BBC until irritated and provoked enough by tales of evil to clamber from my bed and shower and shave. Then a couple of double espressos and toast, followed by an invigorating 30 minute stroll through our local woods, cheerfully greeting the harmless dog-walkers I encounter on my circuit. Then home, more coffee, turn on PC and roll first joint while checking emails before opening the current work file and allowing my

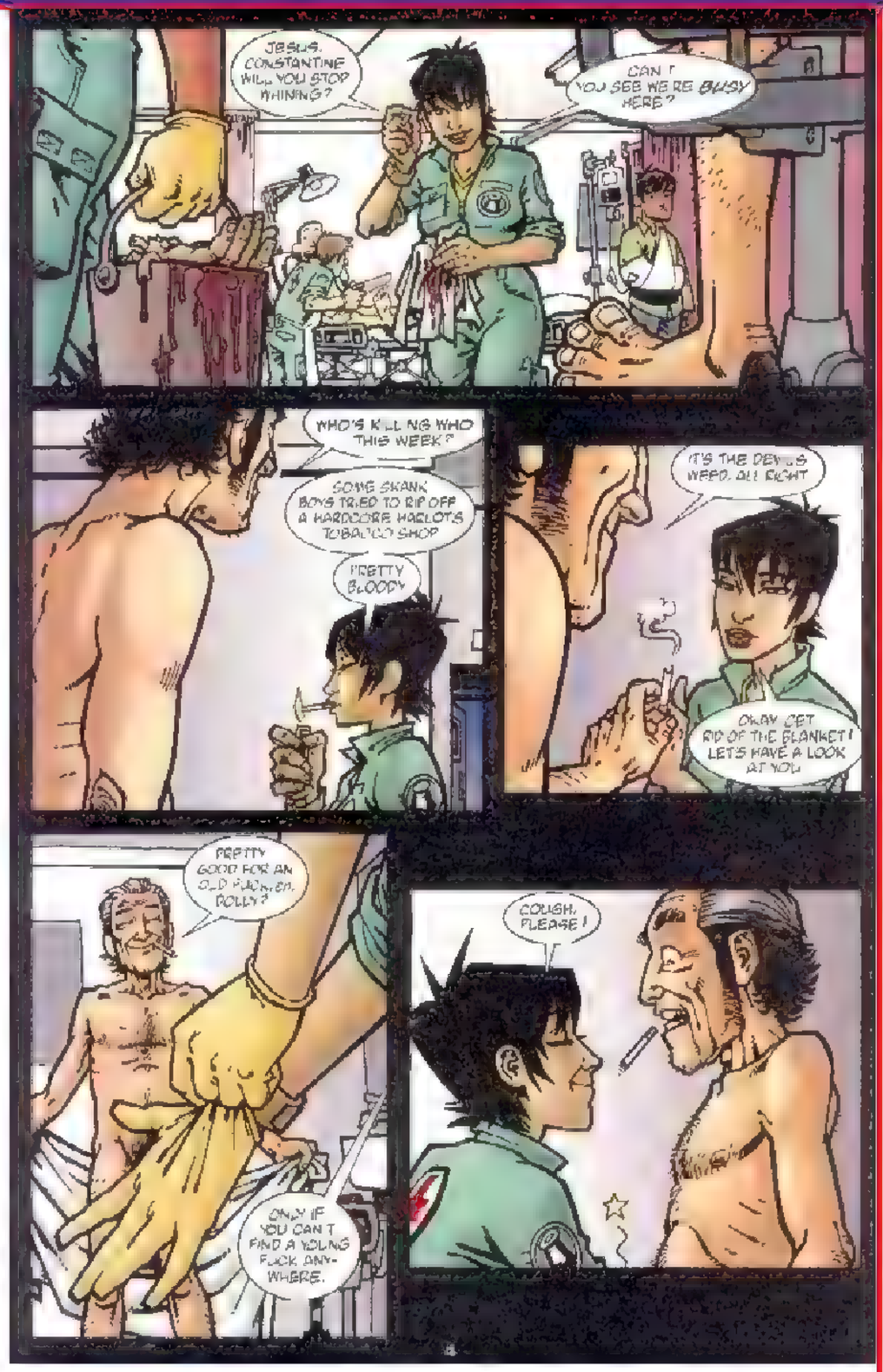


unconscious to unload the products of its automatic nocturnal contemplations in pleasing and coherent story form. When creative energy begins to slump, around 4:00pm, it will be time to answer emails and make phone calls, read, do office chores, etc., before wandering down stairs around 6:00 to help Sue cook and eat a dinner and enjoy the Channel 4 News (snooze!) at 7:00.

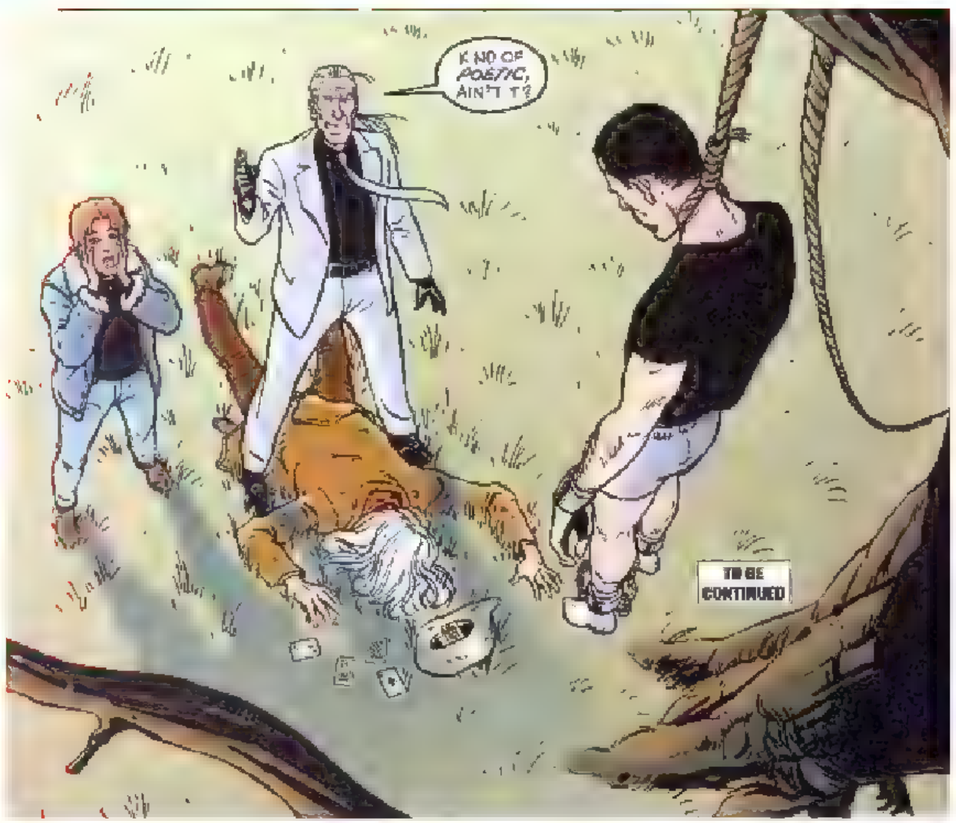
Most days are not "good" working days, though. Most days it takes four or five espressos and an unshaven stalk around the woods terrifying innocent civilians to get me into the study, followed by several hours staring blearily at some jumbled sentences on the screen - interspersed with more trips to the coffee machine, frequent dips into the tobacco pouch, and restless searching for work-avoidance projects, like topping up the pond, watching scanDisk defragment my hard drive, or building a garden fence for my aged dad. Then I choke down a sullen tea and mooch distractedly until guilt pulls me back to the PC to futilely kick some reluctant words around until it's way past midnight and I'm fried enough to sleep. Then it's time to do it all over again. Sheer fucking misery, most of the time. I wouldn't do it if I didn't have to. But as the James Joyce quote scrawled on my monitor frame reminds me, it's a case of "Write, damn you! What else are you good for?" And the good days are just about good enough to make it all worthwhile.

BL: In having to prematurely bring Outlaw Nation to a resolution, did you have to come up with a completely new ending to the one you originally might have intended, or did you just have to streamline in order to reach the climax early?
JD: I think Outlaw Nation was always going to end roughly the way it did, but obviously my expectation was that the journey to that point would be far longer and more meandering. We barely had a chance to sketch in an outline of the story's range before we had to wrap it up; with the resultant abandonment of many unresolved themes and plot-threads that should have built over time into a far more satisfying big picture.

BL: Do you think that Outlaw Nation may have suffered from the expectations of readers looking for another Preacher, especially with Glenn Fabry doing the covers? In hindsight, would you do things any differently, play the game and write ON in trade-paperback-friendly chunks?
JD: Undoubtedly readers looking for another Preacher would have been disappointed. Similarly, many potential readers ignored the book from the start, characterising it (somewhat insultingly) as an attempted Preacher rip-off. From this point of view, Glenn's fine covers - and the books perceived "Western" elements - were a marketing disaster. The freewheeling pace and lack of clear story-arcs in the construction, which seem to have confused and dismayed so many readers, are my sole responsibility though. I wanted to write an epic story encompassing a vast cultural landscape, not an episodic platform for a featured protagonist "hero". My mistake was in overestimating the size of the readership for a work of that kind. Correspondence proves that there were many readers who appreciated my approach - just not enough of them to make the book commercially viable in the mainstream. My thanks to all the "Johnsons" who supported the book, and to the "Gorans" - Sudzuka and Parlov - who so conscientiously brought it to life.


JESUS, CONSTANTINE WILL YOU STOP WHINING?
CAN'T YOU SEE WE'RE BUSY HERE?
WHO'S KILLING WHO THIS WEEK?
SOME SKANK BOYS TRIED TO RIP OFF A HARDCORE HAGLOTS TOBACCO SHOP
PRETTY BLOODY
IT'S THE DEVIL'S WEED. ALL RIGHT
OKAY GET RID OF THE BLANKET! LET'S HAVE A LOOK AT YOU
PRETTY GOOD FOR AN OLD FUCKER, DOLLY?
ONLY IF YOU CAN'T FIND A YOUNG FUCK ANYWHERE.
COUGH, PLEASE!

BL: Now, this one could just be the fevered creation of my own mind at work, but from having met you a few



times at various events, you've adopted a number of different looks, hair and facial-fur-wise. Throughout Outlaw Nation, Story Johnson seems to undergo similar reinventions. Is this a case of art imitating life, or am I reading too much into it?
JD: Story Johnson modifies his appearance through the opening books of Outlaw Nation as he tries ease himself back into, and understand, a culture that has changed exponentially in the 25 years he has been sequestered outside of it. Kind of a chameleon reaction, I guess. In my case it's probably just vanity. Long hair makes a middle-aged man look like Father Time, and facial whiskers itch and scare the grandchildren away.

BL: Name something that is overrated.
JD: Western democracy.

BL: What would you replace it with?
JD: I don't know. Benevolent dictatorship by a superior alien intelligence, maybe.

BL: Name something that is underrated.
JD: Good manners.

BL: Outside of comics, where do your talents lie?
JD: Hidden deep under a peck of bushels, I fear. I can whistle... and roll an elegant long cigarette (although not necessarily at the same time). I can cook anything, as long as it has chili in it, and I can still beat my three year-old grandson at tiddlywinks - but not for much longer, I fear.

BL: Do you have anything else to declare?
JD: Nope. Not even my genius.

BL: How do you see comics changing in the next few years?
JD: I've no idea. It's all up for grabs. Depends how the "War on Terrorism" goes, I guess. Probably we'll see (even) less mainstream tolerance of "dissent"... but who knows? Maybe there'll be a resurgence of a comix underground.

BL: Do you think that the writing is on the wall for the monthly pamphlet form of comics, making way for something more akin to trade paperbacks and self-contained original graphic novels?
JD: I think it is as far as I am personally concerned - and probably more generally in terms of reaching an adult readership. I'd guess that monthly publication will remain predominant in comics' traditional mainstream for quite a while longer, though.

BL: And finally, what's next?
JD: I really don't know, right now. As it plummets towards a Hell of global violence, the world seems a creatively challenging place. I feel myself an increasingly awkward fit in the world of comics which, despite my wishful thinking (I am mulling a few concepts for "original graphic novels"), remains a predominantly escapist medium. I have a screenplay idea under consideration - a near-future political thriller with a UK/ European setting; and I'm tempted to try a little journalism, or maybe a book. I have a long-term desire to bring dime novels back. Illustrated prose fast-fiction might offer opportunities for storytelling limited in comics. Any interested publishers should feel free to get in touch.

And if anyone wishes to comment on anything in this interview, or previous work of mine, I read

everything mailed to *Delanomail@aol.com* and quite often even reply.

I also maintain, at extravagant expense, a website, *www.jamiedelano.co.uk* , at which - now that I have more time on my hands - my suspended journal page will shortly be resumed.

BL: Thanks for your time.
JD: You're welcome.

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November 1983. The Daredevils 11: *Quiet Town 1*. (3 pages), Mighty World of Marvel 7-8: *Quiet Town 2-3* (10 pages total), issue 9: *The Haunting Of Don Salvatore Vischetti* (5 pages), issues 10-11: *All The World's A Stage 1-2* (8 pages total), issue 12: *When In Rome...* (5 pages), issue 13: *The Bells Of Hell* (4 pages), issues 14-16: *Pathology 1-3* (13 pages total), all episodes illustrated by Alan Davis.

Captain Britain (Marvel UK)
January-December 1985. Issues 1-3, 5-12. Illustrated by Alan Davis. Available in trade paperback.

2000AD (Fleetway)
23rd August 1986. Prog 484: *Blood Sport* (2 pages). Illustrated by David Pugh. Reprinted by Quality Comics in Time Twisters 17 (January 1989).
20th December 1986. Prog 501: *Future Shocks: The Ship That Liked To Dance* (4 pages). Illustrated by Barry Kitson. Reprinted by Quality Comics in Time Twisters 17 (January 1989).
10th January 1987. Prog 504: *The Ark* (4 pages). Illustrated by Dave Wyatt.
11th July 1987. Prog 530: *Future Shocks: Fair's Fare* (5 pages). Illustrated by Massimo Bellardinelli. Reprinted by Quality Comics in Time Twisters 10 (June 1988).
6th June 1987-8th August 1987. Progs 525-534: *D.R. & Quinch's Agony Page* (1 page per issue)

Dr. Who Monthly (Marvel UK)
July-September 1986, April-July 1987 Issues 114-116 [*Time Bomb*], 123-126 [*The Gift*]. Both stories illustrated by John Ridgway.

Hellblazer (DC)
January 1988-April 1991, December 1994 Issues 1-24, 28-31, 33-40, 84, Annual number 1 (1989) Illustrated by John Ridgway, Richard Piers Rayner, Mark Buckingham, Bryan Talbot, Sean Phillips, Steve Pugh, Alfredo Alcala, Mike Hoffman, Ron Tiner, Kevin Walker, Dean Motter, Mark Pennington, and Dave McKean. Issues 1-9 are available in trade paperback as Original Sins. Covers by Dave McKean.

World Without End (DC)
1990-1991. Six issue miniseries. Illustrated by John Higgins. A revised reprint of the first chapter was published by John Higgins in the short-lived Razorjack.

Night Raven: House of Cards (Marvel UK)
1991. One-shot graphic novel. Illustrated by David Lloyd.

Animal Man (DC/Vertigo)
September 1992-January 1995. Issues 51-79, Annual 1. Illustrated by Steve Pugh, Scot Eaton, Graham Higgins, John Higgins, Russell Braun, Tom Sutton, Will Simpson, Dan Steffan, and Rafael Kayanan. Covers by Brian Bolland, Dan Brereton, Randy DuBurke, Tom Taggart, George Pratt, Michael Uman, Mark Chiarello, John Van Fleet, Miran Kim and Peter Kuper.

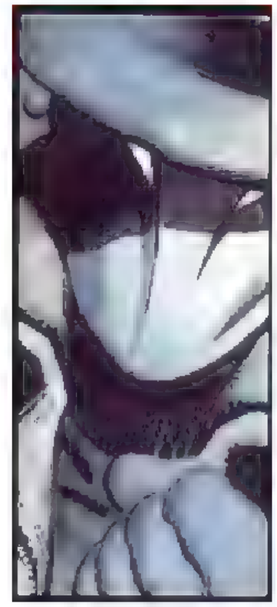
Ghostdancing (DC/Vertigo)
March-November 1995. 6 part miniseries. Illustrated by Richard Case.

Tainted (DC/Vertigo Voices)
February 1995. One-shot. Illustrated by Al Davison.

Batman:Manbat (DC/Elseworlds)
October-December 1995 Art by John Bolton. Available in trade paperback.

The Horrorist (DC/Vertigo)
December 1995-January 1996. 2 part Hellblazer miniseries. Illustrated by David Lloyd.

2020 Visions (DC/Vertigo)
May 1997-April 1998: 12 part limited series divided into four story arcs. Issues 1-3: *Lust For Life* illustrated by Frank Quitely, 4-6: *La Tormenta* illustrated by Warren Pleece, 7-9: *Renegade* illustrated by James Romberger, 10-12: *Repro-Man* illustrated by Steve Pugh.



Shadowman (Acclaim Comics)
July 1997-May 1998: issues 5-15 (13-15 co-written with Dick Foreman). Illustrated by Charlie Adlard.

Hell Eternal (DC/Vertigo Verité)
1998. One shot. Illustrated by Sean Phillips. Still in print and available through DC's backlist program.

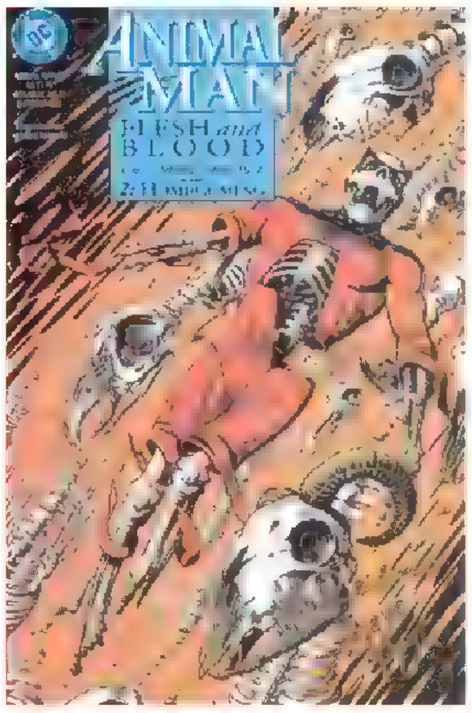
Cruel and Unusual (DC/Vertigo)
June-September 1999. Four part miniseries. Co-authored with Tom Peyer. Illustrated by John McCrea and Andrew Chiu.

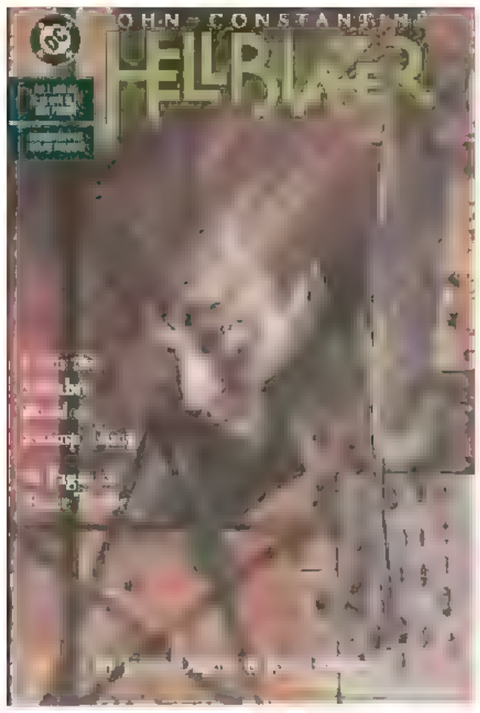
The Territory (Dark Horse)
January-April 1999. Four part miniseries. Co-created with and illustrated by David Lloyd.

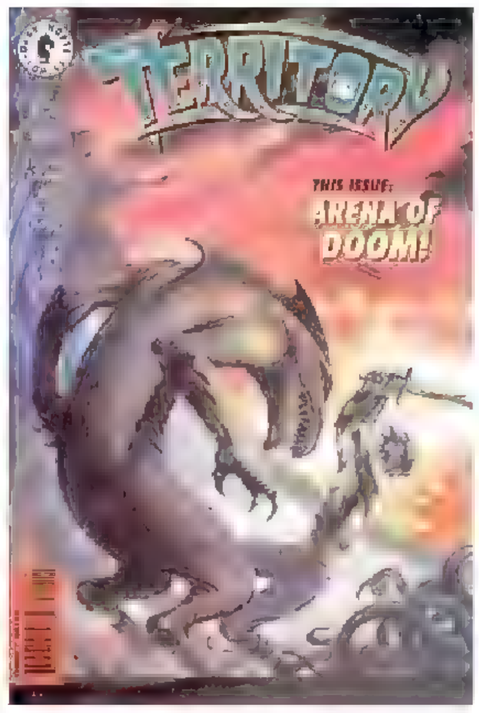
Legends of the DC Universe (DC)
January-February 2000. Issues 24-25: *Darkseid: The Jump*. Two part story. Illustrated by Steve Pugh.

Hellblazer: Bad Blood (DC/Vertigo)
September-December 2000. Four part miniseries. Illustrated by Phillip Bond & Warren Pleece. Covers by Sean Phillips.

Outlaw Nation (DC/Vertigo)
November 2000-May 2002. 19 issues. Illustrated by Goran Sudzuka, Sebastijan Camagajevac & Goran Parlov. Covers by Glenn Fabry.







WALK LIKE A NAVAJO

Oni Press unveils new detective series by husband and wife screenwriting partnership. Duo are joined by Queen & Country artist...

IN May, Oni Press unveils a new four issue miniseries called Skinwalker, written by Nunzio DeFillippis and Christina Weir, pencilled by current Queen & Country artist Brian Hurtt, with inks and digital tones by Arthur Dela Cruz (fresh from his own Oni series, Kissing Chaos) and covers by Durwin Talon.

DeFillippis and Weir are screenwriters by trade, most notably working on the last two seasons of the HBO series *Arliss*. DeFillippis also wrote Chapter Six of the Batman: Officer Down story arc, in Detective Comics last year. Married since 2000, the couple have been writing together for the last five years. Speaking exclusively to Borderline, DeFillippis and Weir revealed the subtle campaign that Nunzio waged in order to make a comic fan out of his wife - a tale familiar to many a comic book reader! To Weir, there can only be one culprit behind it all:

"I blame it all on Greg Rucka. Nunzio grew up reading comic books and therefore always tried to suck me in. But it wasn't until Greg wrote Whiteout that I truly began to appreciate the medium. Greg is an old friend of ours (and Nunzio's college roommate) so I had to be a supportive friend and read his work. And it was really good. When Nunzio wrote his issue of Detective Comics, I got a chance to see the format and how liberating the medium can be for a writer. To someone who had only worked in television where the writer (unless you're Aaron Sorkin) has no control, comics appeared to be a truly collaborative medium."

Skinwalker began life as an idea for a film script. Skinwalkers wear the skins of dead animals; some say in order to gain the knowledge and abilities of the animal, but wilder stories tell of the Skinwalker *becoming* the animal. The thought of a villain who could wear his human victim's skin and effectively become them proved a grotesque but great hook to hang the story upon.

Telling Rucka about the prospective film script, he suggested that they might like to talk to Oni Press, as he thought it would be right up their alley. DeFillippis recalled: "Comics were very enticing to a TV writer because of the control we could have. That was the case at DC, and I was working on one of their big characters. We could only imagine how much more control we'd have at a creator-owned, creator-friendly company like Oni. And it worked out really well for us."

While all this was going on, artist Brian Hurtt was making his own entrance into the comics industry. In his own words: "I'm 26 years old with the social grace of a 12 year old and the body of a 40 year old. And single. I was introduced to comics at the age of 9 starting with titles like G.I. Joe and Walt Simonson's Thor - it just snowballed from there. Because I was already drawing all the time, it seemed obvious to me that I would draw comics when I grew up. Ninja comics. Ultimately, what really drove me into comics is the need to tell stories and the fact that there are absolutely no limitations to the type of stories you can tell. Super Hero Ninja stories, Sci-Fi Ninja stories, Wild West Ninja stories, Romance Ninja stories... the possibilities are endless. After slumming in retail for about 8 years, I finally got my act together and started working on developing a portfolio. I was then introduced by Christine Norrie to Jamie Rich and James Lucas Jones at WizardWorld last year. They were very polite when looking at my portfolio, and sent me on my way feeling hopeful. Soon after, Andrew Lis took a chance on me and gave me an 8 page gig pencilling Jen Van Meter's story in Captain America #50, inked by Jim Mahfood. While working on that project, both Christine and I were contacted to do the next Queen & Country story arc, and I've been on cloud nine since."

Skinwalker is the story of an ambitious FBI Agent and a Navajo Police Officer who must work together to track a killer who has corrupted the forbidden Navajo ritual of Skinwalking. The script for the first issue plays down the supernatural aspect of the story in favour of a more police procedural approach, and an interesting insight into present-day Navajo customs, as the old and new worlds come crashing together. As Christina Weir explained: "The killer does things way beyond the realm of science. But we tried to connect it to science as if to suggest that when you mix magic and science, you get something bigger. What the killer does here is not something any Navajo Skinwalker has ever done. This is new and therefore keeps our two lead characters off balance, never quite sure what they're dealing with."

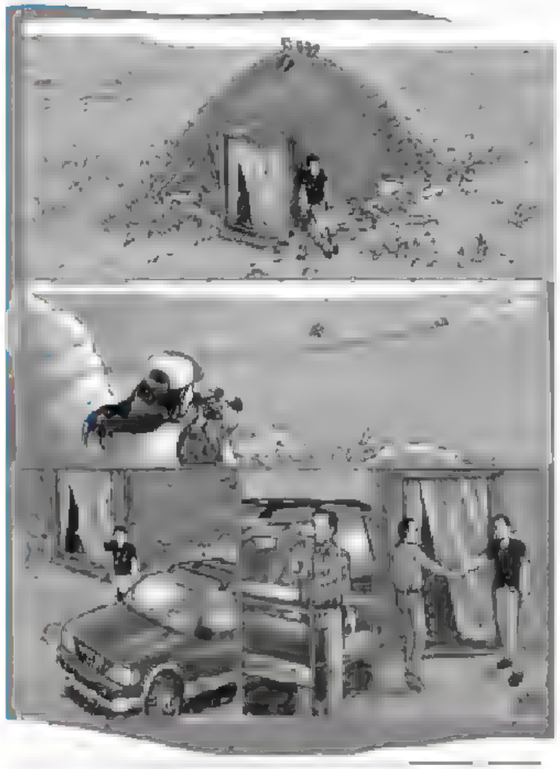
Brian Hurtt found it difficult to talk about the storyline, for fear of spoiling it for readers: "Being that Skinwalker is a

thriller (or is it an intelligent horror story?), it would be too easy for me to accidentally give something away. I will say that it's a page turner that just gets better with every issue - I got goosebumps reading the script."

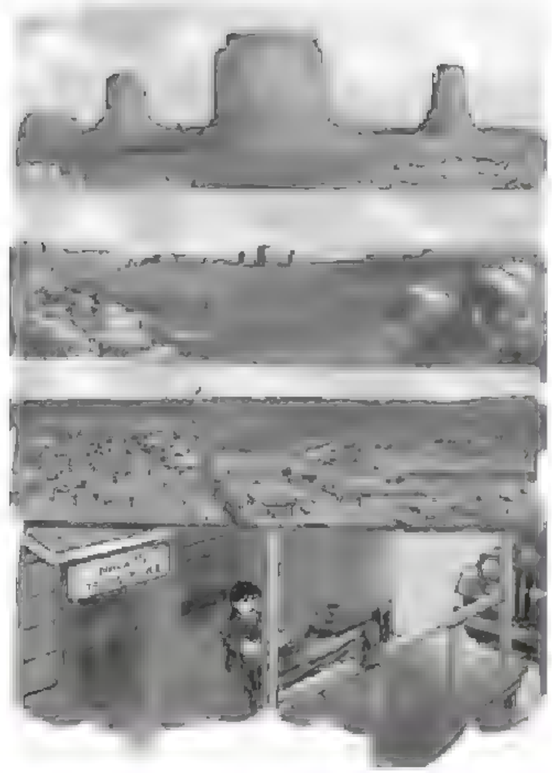
The writers were at pains to point out that they had no claim to Navajo ancestry - their reason for doing the story stemmed mainly from DeFillippis' fascination with and respect for Native American culture, inspired by a trip to Navajo country some years earlier. To make things as realistic as possible, they did a lot of research on the subject, but the main goal was to make Officer Adakai an interesting and compelling character, and Navajo country a fascinating backdrop to the story.

allowing inker Arthur Dela Cruz's digital tones to fatten the image and make it almost pop out of the page at the reader, and looking very different to anything else on the stands at the moment. He paid tribute to Dela Cruz: "The work he has done on the book so far is better than I could have imagined. He does what every penciller could hope for - he makes my pencils look twice as good as they are."

Deeply impressed by their experience working on Skinwalker, DeFillippis and Weir are discussing other ideas with Oni, and are particularly hopeful for one story featuring a female private investigator. Also being talked about is a possible collaboration with their good friends, Greg Rucka and Jen Van Meter, at some point in the future.



Hurtt's early work had, he believes, a cinematic feel to it, emphasising the composition of each panel without regard to the page as a whole. As he grew more savvy to the business, inspired by artists like Eduardo Risso and Igor Kordey's dynamic page design, his style loosened up while working on Queen & Country, and he became more comfortable with the end result. With Skinwalker, Hurtt chose to go for a more restrained look to his layouts,



ALL ROADS LEAD TO BRISTOL

DESPITE there being two other major comics conventions taking place in Germany and The Netherlands, the weekend of the official celebration of the Queen of England's 50th anniversary of her ascension to the throne also sees the Kev F. Sutherland styled fourth annual UK comics festival.

Boasting the best publisher turnout since the inception of this UKCAC replacement, the festival, which takes place on June 1 & 2, will have representatives from Marvel, DC, Image, Oni Press and fine UK representation from DC Thomson, Rebellion, Com.X, Cool Beans World and the Borderline editorial, who will be making their UK debut at the CBW tables.

Unlike most European conventions, Comics 2002, held at the Empire & Commonwealth Museum in Bristol, doesn't benefit from state or government funding, so Sutherland has to organize the event on a shoestring, meaning that fans face having to pay for *anything* that's worth seeing. Also corporate sponsorship of events such as this is almost non-existent in the UK, which means that every single talk, panel and function for the weekend has to be carefully planned and Sutherland is repeatedly faced with walking the budget tightrope.

This year's festival also boasts an impressive list of guests, including: Simon Bisley, Alan Grant, Mike Carey, Roger Langridge, Glen Dakin, Greg Rucka, Adam Hughes, Andi Watson, Joe Quesada, Grant Morrison, Frank Quitely, John Wagner, Dave Gibbons, Sean Phillips, Arthur Ranson and Frazer Irving. However, it is a real shame that the organisers couldn't attract any European or World comics creators, preferring to focus on the US and UK superhero mainstays (which rather works against Sutherland's hopes of making this event and comics in the UK less ghettoised).

There are also a number of fun sponsored events, such as Comics International's "Weakest Link", the National Comic Awards dinner and ceremony and the Cool Beans World pitchfest. See you there!

WHAT A DIFFERENCE A DAY MAKES

COMICS history was made last month. But did everything really change in western comics on April 3 – as a certain comics commentator with the initials WE suggested?

Or was it merely an event which could never have happened before, but which does not affect normal business?

These are the facts: At 8am on April 3, Chris Staros of Top Shelf Productions told the Internet comics community his distributor had gone belly up – owing Top Shelf more than $100,000 and causing cheques written on behalf of Top Shelf to printers, conventions, cartoonists and practically every other aspect of their business to bounce in turn.

"To put it bluntly," Staros said, "even with all the hard work we've put in over the years, if we don't raise $20,000 this month, it could realistically force us to suspend publishing operations for the forseeable future.

"It's hard to believe but a big domino has fallen right on top of us at the worst time possible. So, that leaves us no choice but to be honest and ask for your help."

Staros' request was this: If 400-500 people spent about $50 on Top Shelf's core list of books, they would literally save the company. He said: "We've got such a strong future schedule, and so many cool things to announce soon - including two more Alan Moore projects and two film and TV projects - that I'd hate to think that we'd have to pull the plug right before we just were about to arrive."

Twelve hours later he announced that Top Shelf had been saved.

It was a turnaround that – in an industry habitually fond of hyperbole – was nothing less than spectacular. Top Shelf had been put back on its feet, not over a period of weeks or even days but in just half a day, Thanks in no small part to the Internet.

Or, as Staros himself put it: "What a difference a day makes."

In an e-mail sent at 8pm on April 3, he said: "There are not words suitable to express how honoured and thankful we are that within 12 hours this amazing comics community took it upon itself to bring us back to life. And in this case, it might also be said that the power of the Internet was fully realized."

He said Top Shelf had received 200 phone orders, and a stunning 850 online and e-mail orders: "This staggering 1,000 orders has not only made us operational again (and put several thousand copies of our graphic novels into circulation), but has also reaffirmed to us that the comics industry is back, revitalized, and ready to take on the world.

"We're even estimating that over 100,000 people received the news or were personally involved in the discussion of this online event."

The only dark cloud on Mr Staros' horizon was the fact that the sheer volume of orders had rendered contradictory the way Top Shelf prided itself on how every order would ship out the very next day. He asked customers for patience, saying he hoped to have everything shipped out within the next few weeks. Most tellingly, he revealed he did not believe the astonishing response to his plea had signalled a major change to the system – in which the customer could now habitually bypass the distributor. Instead he said: "In the meantime, if all this activity has made you curious about our books, we would encourage you to ask for them at your local retailer, so that everyone along the chain, retailers and distributors alike, can also benefit from this spur of interest.

"The comics retailing and distributing community... are the front line of our industry, and behind the scenes they have always been the ones that have kept the independent publisher alive."

"We had no idea how incredible the response would be to our request."

Perhaps most astonishing of all – for a community as small, and supposedly contracting, as comics – is the fact that the core audience of superhero fans were unlikely to have been affected by Top Shelf's crisis, or worried about it.

Distribution of superhero comics is more or less exclusively handled by Diamond Comics Distribution, which is not connected with LPC, Top Shelf's distributor. This means that Chris Staros' plea was answered by a different kind of comics reader – a kind which came out in force to show its support.

Could this be the beginning of a new comics culture? One that focuses on different genres to the spandex mainstream?

Nobody knows yet. But with thousands of copies of Top Shelf's output now in circulation, it does not seem impossible that the graphic story format may find new adherents.

Borderline caught up with Staros to find out how it felt to be at the eye of a whirlwind. What had prompted him to make his original announcement via the Internet?

"It was a desperate measure, for sure," he said, "but one Brett [Warnock, Staros' business partner at Top Shelf] and I felt we had to try based on the events that occurred. We just had no idea how incredible the response would be to our request. It was an incredible day, and a testament to the collective good will and power of the comics community and the Internet".

He said the sheer weight of the orders brought in that day meant he had no idea how much money the company had made: "We're actually still working on them, but definitely 1,000 orders came in. And I'm not even sure how much it amounted to yet, as we've been too busy packing boxes to do any addition."

More than 500 boxes have been shipped out, he said, and the company was working furiously on the rest of them. And Top Shelf was still receiving orders: "Yes, the whole event has exposed a few more comics fans to Top Shelf, so orders are still coming in, but things have slowed down to better than normal averages now - i.e. a volume we're equipped to handle."

All of which left just two more questions: Did the size of the response to his announcement change Staros' thinking about how to sell his books? And did he see this event as the start of a major shift away from distributors to customers buying direct from publishers?

"Not really. This was truly a special case, and an event that came from the absolute generosity of the comics community," He said. "In general, we'd prefer distributors and retailers to have our books on the shelves, and fans to be able to pick them up, or order them at their favourite stores. This way, everyone benefits from the sale of the books. "The power of the Internet, in this case, was that when the burst of 'publicity' occurred, the infrastructure was in place for people to be able to get to information and products quickly. It was an event that could have occurred at no other time in history - and that's the real story here."

Five days after the Top Shelf turnaround, independent publisher Drawn & Quarterly announced it was having a sale to cover its own shortfall in profits, caused by the collapse of its distributor. The sale ran until April 17, with a Chris Ware Sketchbook thrown in for free on every order over $150, when it is published in September.

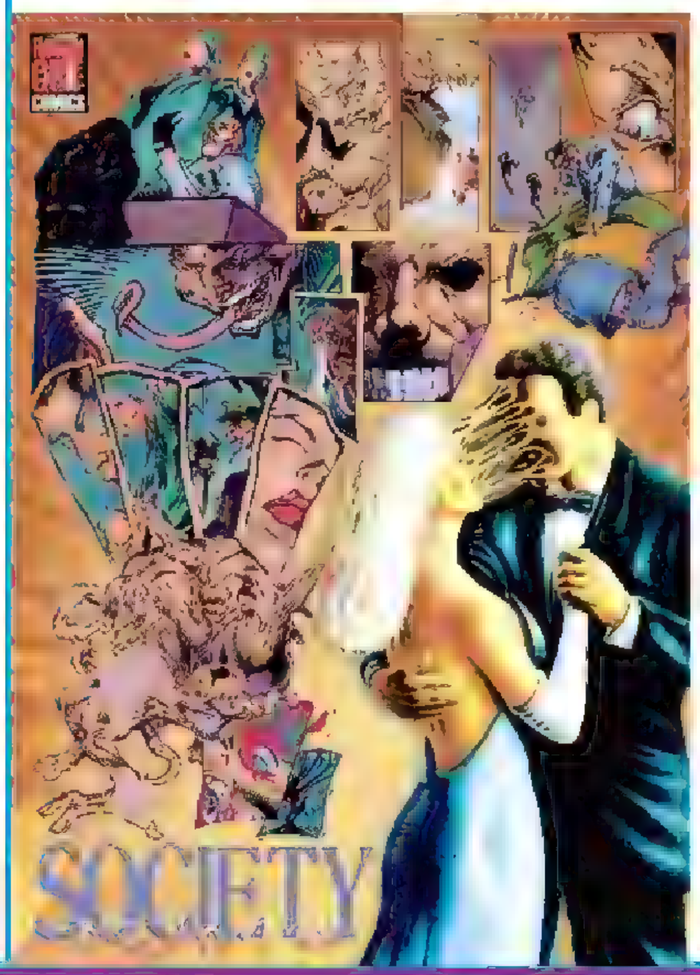
Borderline attempted to contact D&Q after the sale closed, but has received no reply at the time of writing.

ROUGH AND READY

GLASGOW-based indy publishers Rough Cut Comics returns to the fray with two new titles in May/June.

Former film journalist Edward Murphy founded Rough Cut Comics two years ago, with the intention of developing tie-ins between comics, computer games and visual media. The idea came to him at the Cannes Film Festival, after being asked if one of the movie scripts he was shopping was based on a comic strip. With the collaboration of music promoter David McBride, Rough Cut Comics was subsequently born. They made The Surgeon, the script that started the whole ball rolling, their debut title, and sold almost 7000 copies despite not being distributed by Diamond. Following this, at the UK Comics 2001 festival Rough Cut launched a Surgeon one-shot anthology title, Timelines, and Green Pages, a music publication utilising paintings and caricatures instead of photographs.

In May this year Society: Party Animal, adapted from the cult 1989 Brian Yuzna horror satire *Society*, is released. It is written by Colin Barr and illustrated by Rob Liefeld protégé Shelby Robertson, previously best known for his work on Morbid Angel.



Borderline spoke to Murphy about the project, and whether or not the renewed interest in *Society* might feed back into further movies: "The producers and director Brian Yuzna are talking about doing a sequel - and I think, for certain, a successful comic title would push any interest. I think the movie industry is a lot tougher than it was when *Society* was produced back in 1989, and the movie really was a slow burner in the US. I'm sure if investors and distributor know 10,000 people are buying a title, it's easier for them to part with the cash. It was always the intention of Rough Cut Comics to provide that kind of two-way bridge between comics and the independent film, television and games market. I think the initial blueprint was an old 1980 movie called *The Monster Club*, for which the producers hired John Bolton to do a comic-book adaptation of the script, which they distributed at Cannes. I've always been interested in that cross-fertilisation of ideas."

Murphy chose Robertson as the artist for Party Animal because he wanted an Image style to the series, although the next "Society" project, The Three Godfathers, which will either appear as a 52 page one-shot or a two issue miniseries, will feature the art of British newcomer Neil Cameron.

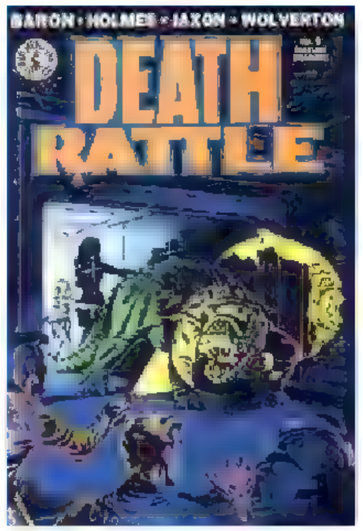
Asked why he chose to resurrect a 13 year old horror film in comic form, Murphy explained: "I had always believed the story premise - that of a young man who believes high-class society is plotting against him - and its bold, audacious visual approach - flesh-stretching mutants in mass cannibalistic orgies - would make a great comicbook formula. However, selfishly, I actually wanted to continue the story from the end of the movie - and I knew from my previous involvement with film festivals over the years, there would be some kind of audience for it. The only downside was many people in the industry were convincing me that horror comics simply don't sell - but we're going to pitch the "Society" concept to a wider audience as a cross between *The X Files* and *The Matrix* with a dash of David Cronenberg."

Rough Cut's other new title, The Freedom Collective, takes a different approach. Done very much in a 1960s Marvel Comics style, its premise is that of a "what if" scenario where Stan Lee and Jack Kirby grew up behind the Iron Curtain. Based on a story idea by infamous UK letterhack El Sloano, Colin Barr once again takes scripting duties. El Sloano, said to be retiring from his letter-writing career, spoke of the inspiration for the story: "I was a huge fan of the early Marvel tales and their almost mythical simplicity. But I always found myself wondering time and time again what Commie kids must have been reading back then."

The Freedom Collective will also mark the return to comics of Glasgow artist Dominic Regan, creator of Dom Zombie, whose work appeared in Trident Comics and A1. If successful, Rough Cut hopes to introduce a whole line of Commie-Verse titles, featuring the likes of the Krimson Kommisar, MIG-4, Ajys, Mastodon and Homeland.

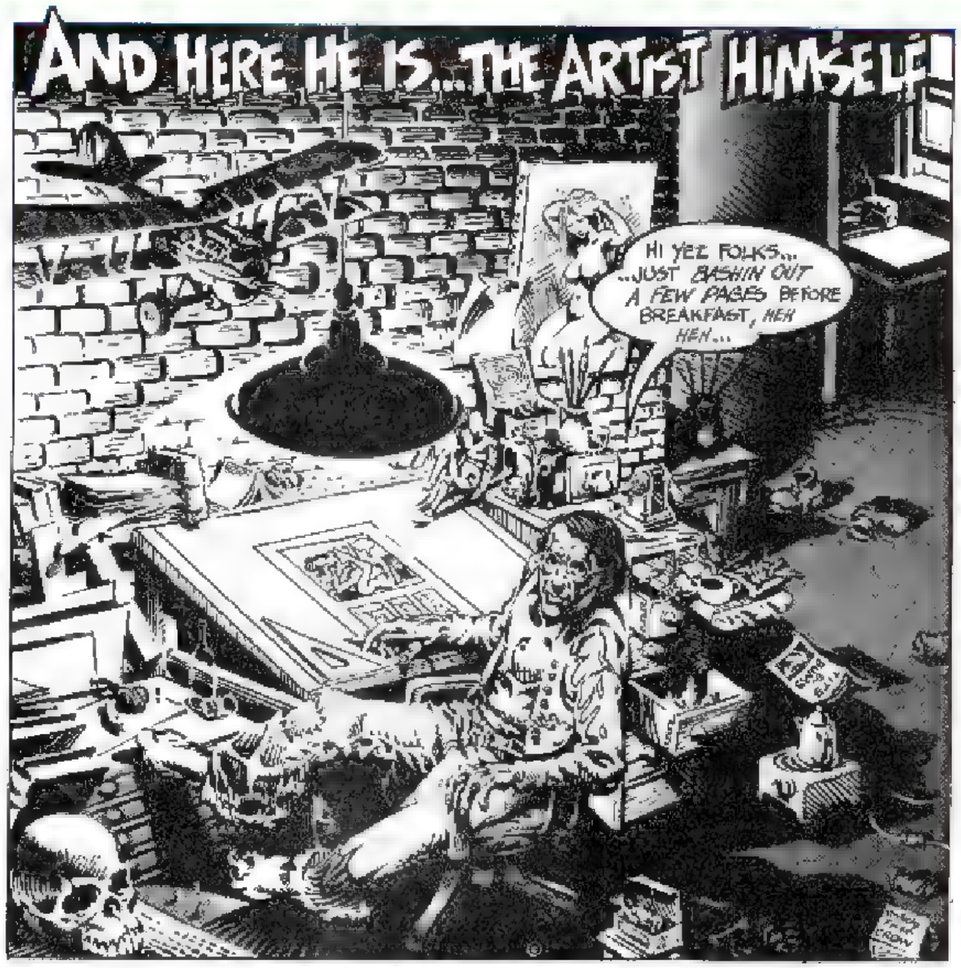
Other titles in the works are comics based on the horror movie series *Phantasm*, and negotiations are ongoing with Irvine Welsh's publishing company to produce comics based on *Trainspotting*.

Rough Cut Comics are available from a number of independent comic shops in the US and UK, and selected Forbidden Planet stores. They hope that Diamond will be carrying Society: Party Animal and The Freedom Collective, which will also be available from the Rough Cut website, *www.roughcut-comics.com*



UNDERGROUND COMIX LOSES AN ICON

Borderline's Joe Spann offers a personal overview of one of underground comix's most influential creators and unsung heroes – a man whose influence on the mainstream is clear to see...



2002 will be remembered as a very bad year for comics, due to the loss of so many beloved and talented cartoonists, including John Buscema and Gray Morrow. And now, we must sadly add Rand Holmes to this list of great artists who have passed away.

Holmes, who began his career as an "underground" cartoonist and created the popular counterculture hero Harold Hedd, died on March 15 from Hodgkin's lymphoma. He had just turned 60.

Holmes was born in Truro, Nova Scotia and was raised in Edmonton, Alberta. From a very early age, it became apparent that drawing was going to be a life-long passion: "Have been drawing ever since I can remember - don't know when I began - probably as a child on the pot finger-painting with my shit - hah! - no real direction of course."

Ironically, considering his talent and dedication, he received little encouragement, particularly at school: "I sketched in my notebooks at school while the others took notes - I got detentions - I got the strap - 'get an "education" first! then learn how to draw if you wish,' they said, reinforcing the message with a variety of punishments (God knows how many young minds irreparably mutilated by these misguided sadists with the unmitigated gall to refer to themselves as teachers!)... as for myself I persevered. I spent 13 years in school and managed not to learn anything except how to draw."

It is also interesting to note that he wasn't exposed to much in the way of cartooning during this time. Since EC comics had been banned in Alberta, he wasn't exposed to the work of Wally Wood, whose style he was later able to emulate so effectively, until long after he had begun drawing. "See, in Canada is no magazines, no comics, no nuthin' - only American imports - better to become a refrigerator repairman in Greenland than a cartoonist in Canada."

Despite lack of encouragement, Holmes persevered and had his first cartoon published in Harvey Kurtzman's **Help!**. But, everyday life was to put his career on hold, at least for a time. After he graduated from school, he married, had two children and worked as a sign painter for five years. He might have continued to live a very middle class existence, had it not been for a trip to Vancouver to visit his brother. Once there, Holmes found that he had an appointment with destiny:

"In 1968 my brother turned me on to psychedelics - I woke up - left wife and job and split for the west coast, grew hair down to my ass, moved into a communal house and vowed to never again do anything I didn't want to do, especially for money - after that simple decision I was suddenly free."

Free enough, in fact, to once again pursue his love of cartooning. He soon began working for the then radical weekly *Georgia Straight*, producing editorial cartoons and his most famous character, Harold Hedd. It was during this time that Holmes perfected his technique and considerable storytelling abilities.

He also became a devastatingly effective satirist, due perhaps in part to the hostility his teachers had shown over his drawing in their classes. This early exposure to unreasonable and sometimes violent authority figures made Holmes a natural fit for the "anti-establishment" *Straight* and underground cartooning in general. Blessed with an innate sense of the absurd, he finally had the opportunity to "return the favour" to society. **Harold Hedd** was to be his instrument.

The strip quickly became one of the most popular characters in underground comix, frequently mentioned alongside Gilbert Sheldon's The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers, Robert Crumb's Mr. Natural and Spain's Trashman. Harold was Holmes' extreme alter ego, a dope-smoking hippie adventurer who might either be using a WWII bomber to fly a load of marijuana into Canada or wearing a dildo on his head and philosophically discussing Vancouver's archaic obscenity laws. His readers never knew what to expect, except great satire and the skewering of any

Click on Globe returns to contents

AH—GASP!
..AH—WHEEZE!
AH—PANT!
GOLD SHOT NIP!... SMASHED HIS SKULL LIKE TWAS A CANTALOUPE...
.. SNICKER
MAKES AN UNSIGHTLY MESS ON THE 'OL FRONT STOOP THO—

number of sacred cows.

It was perhaps inevitable that the same strap-wielding establishment that Holmes was skewering with his cartoons would eventually attempt to put a stop to it. *Georgia Straight*, due to its radical politics, had always been a target for legal harassment by Vancouver's conservative political establishment. The weekly had been successful in weathering these legal storms until 1973, when the authorities decided that "comics are for kids" and confiscated all of the *Straight*'s comic books. Obscenity charges were filed against the publication and, unfortunately for Holmes, were upheld in court. *Georgia Straight* was forbidden to print comics of any kind, effectively ending his tenure there.

Around the same time the underground comix movement began to lose steam, as its distribution network of "head shops" fell apart due to lawsuits and stricter zoning laws. Only a few publishers, such as Last Gasp Eco Funnies, were able to stay afloat.

Holmes' by then considerable reputation enabled him to continue cartooning, however, and he worked on a number of projects. These included providing covers and stories for Stamparts' **Fog City Comics**, which featured his hilariously vulgar funny animal parody, *Nip 'n Tuck*. He also contributed to Last Gasp's horror anthology **Slow Death**, which highlighted his talent for SF and horror stories, created a benefit poster for Greenpeace, and drew the cover for Mark James Estren's **The History of Underground Comics.**

The explosion of the direct sales market in the early 80s resulted in the creation of several new comics publishers and provided Holmes with new venues for his work. His output during this time consisted primarily of EC-inspired horror stories which appeared in Pacific Comics' **Twisted Tales** and Kitchen Sink Comix' **Death Rattle**. It was in **Twisted Tales #5** that Holmes collaborated with writer Bruce Jones to create the story for which he is probably best known to today's comic fans, *Banjo Lessons*.

With its explosive themes of racism, murder, homosexuality and animal abuse, *Banjo Lessons* shocked comic readers in 1983 and ignited fears of obscenity lawsuits against comic shop owners and publishers. April Campbell, the editor of the magazine, even felt the need to write a full page editorial defending the story on the inside front cover of the issue.

But much had changed during the decade since the *Georgia Straight* case, and the feared lawsuits never materialized. *Banjo Lessons* firmly established Holmes as one of the top horror cartoonists in the industry. During the rest of the decade he collaborated with writers Mike Baron, Robert Ingersoll and Jan Strnad in producing several of the best dark fantasies that comics readers had seen since EC's end. Three of his best works from this time were *Junkyard Dog* in **Death Rattle #5**, *Catcalls* in **Death Rattle #6**, and *Slide, Sinner, Slide!* in **Death Rattle #17**.

Sadly, the 90s saw a decline of the undercapitalized direct sales market and most of the titles that had been the primary venues for Holmes' work disappeared. At the same time, he found it increasingly stressful to work under the demanding deadlines of the comics industry; so, apart from agreeing to do a comic book project with the late Jerry Garcia in 1995, he retired from cartooning.

Holmes final years were spent on Lasqueti Island, living off the land and in the house that he and his wife Martha had built themselves. He also turned his talent toward oil painting and produced canvases that, true to his delightful sense of the perverse, were designed to tweak the sensibilities of "the establishment".

One painting in particular, "The Bud Clippers", has received some attention since his death. The subject is a domestic scene of a large extended family gathered at a kitchen table, much as you would expect to see in a Norman Rockwell painting. The family, however, is preparing a crop of marijuana, turning the Rockwellian notion of family togetherness on its head. It's difficult not to giggle at the thought of "The Bud Clippers" being featured on the cover of *The Saturday Evening Post*.

Holmes is survived by his wife, Martha and their son Sirett, as well as his two children from his first marriage, Ron and Michelle. He also has one grandson, Denten Rand Holmes.

*All quotes by Rand are from **A History of Underground Comics** by Mark James Estren.*

THE TOURIST TRAP

ITALIAN publisher Casiraghi Jones Publishing SRL has launched a new educational title on the market, **Daisy Hamilton's English 4 Life**, with the intention of helping Italians who are learning to speak English. Publishers Roberto Casiraghi and Crystal Jones decided to draw upon the extensive DC Thomson archives for appropriate comic strips such as *Girl Friday* (about a girl working as a Personal Assistant), *Penny's Place* (where a family moves home to run a shop, and the teenage daughter is bullied at school), a football strip called *We Are United* and a veterinary themed photo-strip, *Animal Park*. Strips were chosen primarily according to suitability for illustrating "street English", as it is spoken, rather than textbook usage.

Alongside the reprinted material in the first issue, released last March, was an original text story introducing Daisy Hamilton, a female private detective, written by publisher Crystal Jones and illustrated by Brian Williamson, best known for his work on **Transformers** and **Doctor Who** for Marvel UK.

WELCOME TO WESTMINSTER ABBEY, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN.
...JUST A FEW HOURS BEFORE YOU EXPLORE ON YOUR OWN...
IMPRESSIVE, DO THEY STILL BUILD WITH STONE?
I'LL BE YOU'VE BEEN READING OUR HISTORY
AS YOU WANDER AROUND, YOU'LL SEE THE TOMBS OF AND MEMORIALS TO KINGS, QUEEN, KNIGHTS AND SOME ACTORS, MUSICIANS AND STATESMEN.

Following on from that the second issue contains a new strip, created in Britain specifically for **E4L** and entitled *The Grand Tour*. It heralds the return to comic strip writing of John Freeman, after an extended period in various editorial roles for titles such as *Doctor Who Magazine*, Titan's *Babylon 5* magazine, and in freelance consultancy work. Illustrating *The Grand Tour* is recent **Borderline** Drawing Board subject Mike Collins. **Borderline** spoke to Freeman about his involvement with **English 4 Life**, and the concept behind *The Grand Tour*: "[The publishers] originally approached me back in July 2001 about creating a new comic strip for their new magazine. The title draws on DC Thomson reprint material and new strips to teach English as a foreign language. The first issue is already selling well in Italy.

"The second issue also introduces a dual format, where readers can choose to buy the standard version for five Euros, or an enhanced edition with a cover-mounted CD, which narrates the contents of the magazine like the old "Teach Yourself" language tapes.

"Although [the publishers] were happy with the reprint material, they also wanted something more up to date, but not too fantastical. That meant specific origination, and Roberto and I threw some ideas back and forth by phone and email until I came up with the *Grand Tour* concept - aliens and humans in disguise on Earth, coming back in time and being taken on guided tours of historical places, which perhaps don't exist in the future. Of course, things will go awry while they're here. They're tourists who try to speak in modern English, but get things mixed up. [They have translation devices which enable them to speak perfect English, but do not account for street lingo or nuances which native speakers take for granted, leading to humorous misunderstandings.] For example, one of the aliens gives a passing tramp some spare change, but he gives him a sovereign, thinking that's the current currency in the UK. The first story involves a rogue alien with some strange plans for the Tower of London, and a future human with a burning desire to witness a poignant historical event - but he might actually stop that event from happening, which could have rather disastrous personal consequences!"

The Grand Tour will eventually run to 68 pages in total, serialised in four page instalments each month. The plan is to package the strip in album form later on. In order to facilitate the aim of the magazine, the strip runs in English, with the Italian translation alongside it.

Casiraghi and Jones are said to be delighted with the strip, and are discussing the possibilities of some additional self-contained stories after the initial story concludes. Freeman commented on how he and his collaborator were enjoying the work: "I'm delighted to be writing comics again - and Mike seems pleased to be doing something in a realistic style that's slightly different to his usual commissions."

Nick Miller, another British artist associate of Freeman's, has now been commissioned to work on a one-page cartoon strip for **E4L**. Set in a seedy hotel whose owners desperately try anything they can think of to boost their ailing business, as long as it doesn't cost them any money, the strip is written by Italian writer Antonella Caputo. The publishers aim to gradually increase the amount of original strip content in the magazine. By commissioning new, company-owned material which fits their needs exactly, Casiraghi Jones will be able to develop it in other media should the opportunity arise.

Interested readers might like to check out the Casiraghi Jones website for details of their Italian press campaign for the first issue: *http://www.linguefaidate.comnfo* , a somewhat more enthusiastic promotion of a new comic than we're used to seeing in Britain!

Freeman mentioned that his latest project is to find suitable writers and artists for a German language title in the same vein as **English 4 Life**, in order to help Italian readers with their "street German".

DEAN DOESN'T THIS JOB WORRY YOU?
IN WHAT WAY?
WELL, WE KNOW SO LITTLE ABOUT THESE TOURISTS...
THEY'RE PRE-SCREENED BY CENTRAL BEFORE WE EVEN MEET 'EM.
WELL, THAT GUIDE COULD FIND THEIR ANCESTOR, FIX IT SO THAT THEY NEVER MEET THE PARTNER WHO INSURES THAT TOURIST IS BORN...
...AND THEY NEVER WOULD BE.
WE COULD CHANGE HISTORY EASILY.
BUT WHAT IF CENTRAL MISS A DANGEROUS CRIMINAL? SOMEONE WHO COULD DO A LOT OF DAMAGE IN THE PAST?
IT'S NEVER HAPPENED BECAUSE THEY HAVE TO BE.
DON'T WORRY - WHEN IT COMES TO HANDLING FIRST TIMER DAY TRIPS LIKE THIS ONE-
WHY DO I NOT FEEL REASSURED?
YOU WON'T HAVE MUCH CHANCE TO CONSIDER THE RAMIFICATIONS OF TIME TRAVEL!
NEXUS

Click on Globe returns to contents

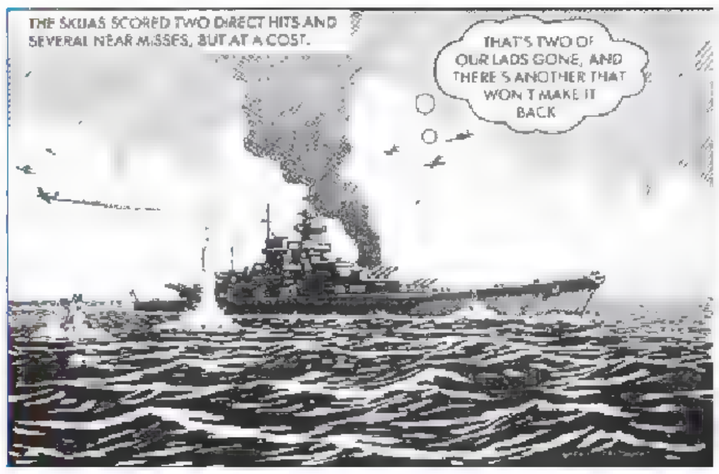
DENIS MCLOUGHLIN REMEMBERED

JUST as this issue of **Borderline** was on the verge of completion, Internet comics fans were apprised of the sad news that veteran British comics artist Denis McLoughlin had died suddenly at his home in Bolton, Lancashire on April 22, just one week after his 84th birthday.

McLoughlin was born in Bolton and lived there all his life, attending local schools then winning a scholarship to the Bolton School of Art. He began his professional career during the 1930s, working as a catalogue illustrator and doing his first comics work drawing homegrown covers for newspaper reprints of US Sunday comic strip supplements.

During World War II he served in the Royal Artillery but continued to produce much freelance work, in particular painting cover illustrations for thrillers. He is estimated to have produced more than 700 such illustrations during his career.

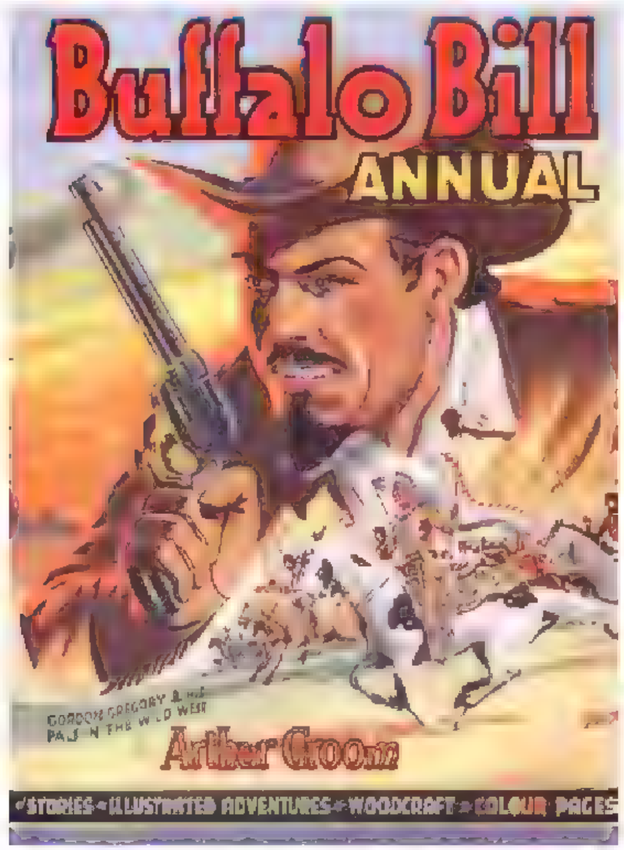
In 1946 McLoughlin joined in the post-war vogue for production of independent comics and published his own one-shot **Lightning Comic**. This brought him to the attention of T.V. Boardman, a publisher of thrillers which was moving into the comics business, and from 1948 to 1953 McLoughlin produced for the company three series which are regarded by collectors as being amongst the classics of British comics; the SF strip **Speed Morgan**, a detective series named **Roy Carson** which was a superb example of British crime comics, evoking the dingy, desperate atmosphere of Graham Greene's **Brighton Rock** rather than the more usual Chicago-style gangsterisms, and the Western title **Buffalo Bill**.


THE SKUAS SCORED TWO DIRECT HITS AND SEVERAL NEAR MISSES, BUT AT A COST.
THAT'S TWO OF OUR LADS GONE, AND THERE'S ANOTHER THAT WON'T MAKE IT BACK

The setting of that last series was particularly dear to McLoughlin (who was sometimes nicknamed "The Lancashire Cowboy"), and he developed its concept further in what is probably his best remembered and most loved body of work, the **Buffalo Bill Annuals** published by Boardman between 1949 and 1961. Unlike most British annuals these were not just collections of discrete stories, strips and puzzles relating to a weekly comic or film of TV series; they were a fully integrated series, with some internal continuity, in which each year three modern schoolboys travelled back through time to the Old West and experienced the nature of a cowboy's life. The earliest ones were written by Arthur Groom, but McLoughlin subsequently produced them solo, creating an almost unique hybrid of prose and comics intended to be read as a book, not as a set of separate stories. His passion for the subject matter - in 1973 he wrote a prose encyclopaedia of the West's history, **Wild and Woolly**, which remains one of the most engaging and informative works on the topic - ensured the books' authenticity, and his imaginative sense of design, incorporating illustrative page frames, full painted art, dramatic strips and humorous cartoons, made the Buffalo Bill books perhaps the most attractive British annuals ever published.

McLoughlin continued to work for Boardman until the company ceased trading in the late 1960s, producing some comics and turning out many dustjacket paintings and paperback covers for their Popular Press imprint. In the 1970s he switched to working for the two major British comics publishers, turning out a number of dramatic series including *Sabre* and *Big Hit Smith* for **Tiger** (IPC) and *The Green Lizard, Iron Fist* and *Frankie and Johnny* for **Wizard** (DC Thomson).

As the British action/adventure weeklies began to be cancelled during the 1980s, McLoughlin took his traditional style of action art to one of the last thriving venues for it, DC Thomson's **Commando Picture Library**. Continuing working right up until his death, he drew and inked on average around four complete 65 page stories a year for the series, totalling about 80 in all. *(A review of a current reissue of a **Commando** story he drew in 1987 can be found in "The Verdict" elsewhere in this issue of **Borderline**.)*

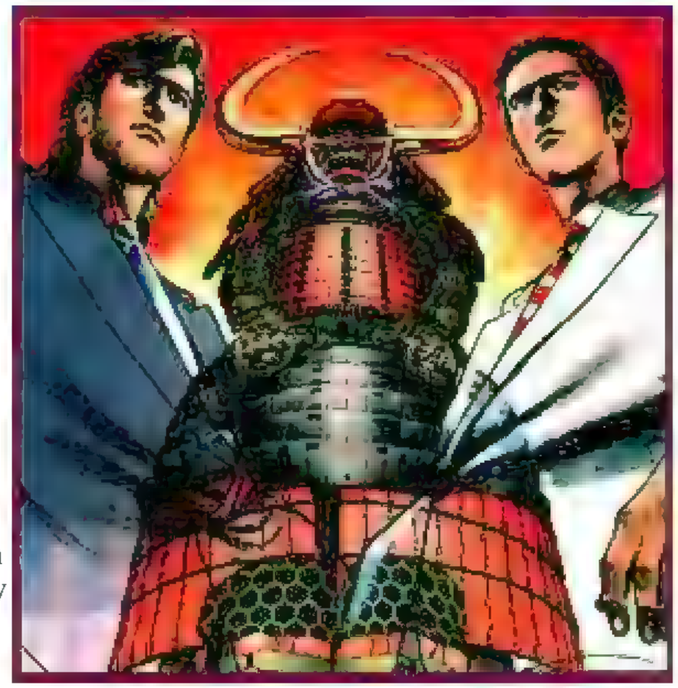


Francis Hertzberg's study of McLoughlin's work describes him as a "master of light and shade". It is an accurate description. Where most British comics artists of his generation opted either for painted work or for decorative, flowing linework, he evolved an instantly recognisable style which combined solid spotted blacks, firm outlines, small discontinuous curved lines indicating detail and precise, 45 degree angled straight lines to represent grey shades. The results often had something of the quality of an engraving, highly detailed but also full of subtleties, and particularly well suited for night-time scenes and seascapes.

With the exception of his Buffalo Bill Annuals, much of McLoughlin's work was, like that of many of his British contemporaries, published anonymously. Consequently it has for many years been known and admired only by a small number of fans and collectors, never receiving the recognition it deserved from comics fans at large. In recent years, though, international awareness of his achievements has increased, largely due to the efforts of American fan Matthew Gore, whose McLoughlin websites, *http://www.geocities.com/Hollywood/Hills/6569/DenisMc/* and *http://www.leylander.com/intercom/DenisMc/denis.htm*, contain a wealth of information about the artist and many examples of his work.

WHAT IS MANGA?

Kevin Hill looks at the key manga series Eagle and Sanctuary by Kaiji Kawaguchi



The East Wing

THE West Wing is one of the few highlights of current British television schedules, arguably being one of the best political dramas in recent years. Its mix of realistic situations and believable characters has drawn the programme plaudits it richly deserves. Now it may seem as though this month's column is just a review of *The West Wing*, but it's not. *The West Wing* is just a useful way of broaching the topic of comics whose subject is based around modern politics.

Recently nominated for an Eisner Award, Viz Communications' **Eagle**, by Kaiji Kawaguchi, is widely acknowledged as a fine piece of political storytelling, with many comparing it to *The West Wing* - an unusual accolade for a comic book. This comparison isn't wholly inaccurate, in that both series are largely character-led, with much attention paid to the details of the political process. Where they differ is in the way in which the story is told: *The West Wing* revolves around the Presidential staff, whether they be speechwriter, advisor, aide, or secretary; the focus of each episode is rarely on one particular character or story. It may seem as though **Eagle** is focusing on Asian-American Presidential candidate Kenneth Yamaoka, but the story is told through the eyes of Takashi Jo, a Japanese reporter covering the campaign from within Yamaoka's headquarters - and who just happens to be the illegitimate son of Yamaoka.

While diversions are made to highlight the machinations of other characters - such as Yamaoka's opponent Noah - or to meet the latest people in whom Yamaoka is affecting a change by his headstrong political acuteness, ultimately we return to the thoughts and life of Takashi Jo. This weaving of the story helps develop the characters of Yamaoka's campaign, and reveals bit by bit the personality that drives Yamaoka towards his goal of becoming leader of the free world. As Takashi Jo learns about his father, so we learn about Presidential candidate Yamaoka.

While Kawaguchi has a flair for the dramatic, with scandals and other exciting incidents occurring, ultimately the electoral process stands centre stage, with **Eagle** appearing to be a study of American politics and Presidential elections, rather than just a work of fiction.

Where **Eagle** looks into the heart of American politics, it wasn't the first translated Japanese comic to tackle politics. Viz also published **Sanctuary**: this saw the creative teaming of writer Sho Fumimura (also known as Buronson, and previously responsible for both the ultra-violent **Fist Of The North Star** and the lineage-obsessed **Strain**) with artist Ryoichi Ikegami (who provided the visuals for the aforementioned **Strain**, as well as for **Crying Freeman**, **Mai The Psychic Girl** and, of all things, **Spider-Man**).

Unlike **Eagle**, Sanctuary is set in Japan, and concentrates on the working of not only the Diet - Japan's equivalent to the House of Representatives or the British Parliament - but also the underworld of the Yakuza. The story follows the fortunes of two men who, as children, survived Cambodia's killing fields together. Spurred on by their experience they attempt to change Japan, with one entering the darkness of the Japanese underworld, and the other entering the political arena. With their fate decided by a simple children's game, Chiaki Asami attempts to change the face of Japanese politics, and Akira Hojo works his way through the ranks of the Yakuza.

Essentially **Sanctuary** is two stories; one dark, one light, but both with the same plot - the creation of a "sanctuary", the perfect country for Asami and Hojo to live within. Reflecting the way **Eagle**'s Yamaoka affects those around him, much of the story revolves around the "aura" generated by the pair of protagonists, affecting the people whom they meet - whether making enemies of those fearful of the changes they seek to make, or creating allies willing to assist them in changing Japan.

The two settings of the story cross over with each other on occasion, to show the interweaving of Japanese society, with politicians seeking aid from the criminal organisations who themselves use politicians to abet their criminal activities. During these moments the leads are at their strongest, combining to face the walls of resistance from other criminal organisations and political parties.

As the story flows, the personalities imbued within Asami and Hojo can't help but affect you - much in the way Martin Sheen's character in *The West Wing*, President Bartlett, gives you that sense of awe and belief. They want to change Japan and the world for the better, and you will want them to succeed.

Do they succeed? Does Yamaoka become President? Do Asami and Hojo find their sanctuary? You won't know unless you read the books. Don't be afraid to because they're comics, or from Japan; they're stories set in the world of politics - with not a superhero, little creature or hyperactive martial artist in sight.

*Both **Sanctuary** Vol.s 1-9 and **Eagle** Books 1-5 are available from Viz Communications.*

TRANSATLANTIC MEDITATIONS

Respected editor Arnold T. Blumberg joins the Borderline team with his musings from America...

IT'S all Adam West's fault.

Well, OK, that isn't strictly true, but it made for a snappy and provocative opening for my new column here in the pages of Borderline. As the sole US-based columnist in this fine publication, it falls upon me to explore some of the more peculiar idiosyncrasies of the American comicbook experience and where it stands here at the dawn of the 21st century through the eyes of one caught in the maelstrom, as it were. I will not apologize for the ways in which the US superhero contingent has eclipsed the efforts of many fine creators the world over, nor will I seek to justify the peculiar American bias toward comics as nothing more than "funny books for kids," but I do want to discuss those notions and others as the months wear on.

Certainly one of the biggest crimes that America has perpetrated on comics as a medium has been marginalizing it to the dark, shadowy corners of ye local comic book shop and perhaps a few convenience stores. These are strange, creepy places, off the beaten path for the mainstream consumer, and as a result comics are a mysterious medium to many Americans, most of whom actually do not know they are still produced today. "They still make those funny books?" Sigh. Yes, they still do, Joe Six-Pack. And some of them are even good.

While this invisibility screen doesn't apply to comics the world over, it has hampered their image and potential widespread appeal in the country where the largest English language comicbook publishers and their industry's distribution infrastructure are based. Comicbooks are kid stuff to most Americans - silly stories about fuzzy animals or spandex-wearing clods who beat each other to a bloody pulp for no discernible reason (insiders can't figure it out either, truth to tell, but that's another story). True, the industry has made some headway in recent years by partnering with other media to produce a few high-profile comics-based adventure films (and let's not forget *Ghost World*), but even those efforts must struggle against decades of ingrained behavior. And what is the most obvious indicator that we still have such a long way to go? It can be summed up in a few simple little words.

BAM. ZAP. BIFF. ZOWIE. Take your pick. They litter the newspapers and so-called "serious" news magazines every time a comicbook film or, as rare as this might be, a comicbook itself, warrants coverage in their esteemed pages. Some clueless journalist who would be more at home analyzing trade negotiations or reporting from the frontlines in Bosnia gets the assignment to write about that new movie with the costumed heroes, and so he does what every other American journalist has done since 1966. He dimly recalls the fight sequences from the campy Adam West *Batman* TV series, and the headline comes to him like a bolt from Mt. Olympus. "How clever I shall be! I will evoke the style of the very comics these weird little folk love so much! POW! SOCK!" And we as an industry sigh and drop our heads in shame.

Thanks to that kitschy series and its cleverly enhanced fight sequences complete with visible sound effect balloons, we have been treated to an endless parade of identical articles in the mainstream press for the last forty years, all of which have boiled the entire comic book medium down to two or three onomatopoeic words. The editorial staffs of *Time*, *Newsweek*, and every major newspaper across the country seem to think that everything in comics can be summed up in those colorful cartoon blurbs, as if Maus, Strangers in Paradise, Akiko, Pedro and Me, Cerebus (the early stuff, not the current pamphlets), and even, heaven help me, Batman, as well as countless other comics having very little to do with the aforementioned spandex, are all part of one homogenous, brightly hued, caped crusading whole. And you'll note that list was still limited to US-produced comics. Of course, we know better - we've seen the amazing material produced by creators in the UK, France, Italy, Spain, and so on, but how do we explain it to them?

There is no easy solution. If there was, I would have made a mint by now and comics would be on the coffee tables of every American family home along with *Entertainment Weekly* and *TV Guide*. But they're not, and more's the pity. So after spending my entire first instalment preaching to the choir, which I suspect will be happening a lot in the months to come, what do we wind up with? Well, you have me. I'll stick around for a while and try to come up with some answers, and at the very least we can have some fun examining these and many more issues together. Even as you shake your heads in disgust, let me reassure you that as I rant on about whatever strikes me, hoping against hope that it will all make sense and this column will offer you some few nuggets of homespun American wisdom (no snickering now), the most you will lose by reading this is a few minutes out of your day. Not a small price to pay if we manage to sort it all out and usher in a new era where comics are embraced by the mainstream and acknowledged as a worthy source of entertainment, edification and enlightenment.

Now go read some of "them funny books".

Arnold is co-author and designer of Howe's Transcendental Toybox, the first-ever comprehensive guide to Doctor Who collectibles. He is Editor of Gemstone Publishing's The Overstreet Comic Book Price Guide and Hake's Price Guide to Character Toys. He is also Senior Editor of Cinescape *(www.cinescape.com). One day he will own a police box of his very own, and all time and space will bend to his will. He can be pestered at the14thdoctor@yahoo.com.*

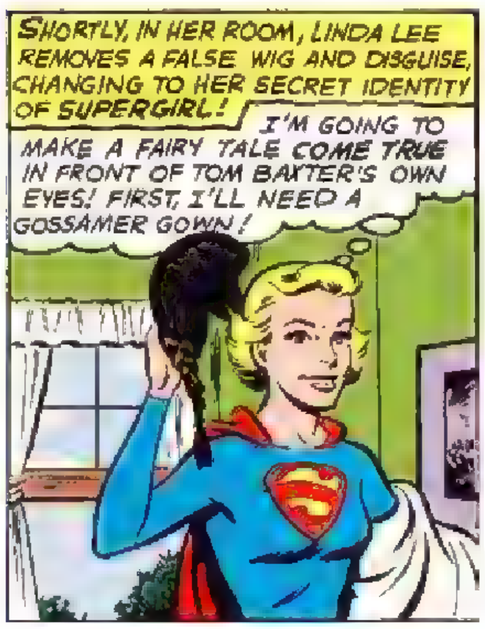
MILESTONES

Mike Kidson takes a break from his exploration of key moments in the history of comicbooks to review a DC archives collection of Supergirl...

*WHEN **Borderline** was being set up, this column was at first intended to be a review space for older comics, specifically US Golden and Silver Age material. This month, just for a change, I'm going to revert to that original idea and indulge in a review of one of the recent DC Archives volumes.*

THE SUPERGIRL ARCHIVES
DC
By Otto Binder, Jerry Siegel, Jim Mooney and others

Collections like this one, of DC stories published in 1958-1960, may require a bit of mental adjustment on the part of the modern reader of


SHORTLY, IN HER ROOM, LINDA LEE REMOVES A FALSE WIG AND DISGUISE, CHANGING TO HER SECRET IDENTITY OF SUPERGIRL!
I'M GOING TO MAKE A FAIRY TALE COME TRUE IN FRONT OF TOM BAXTER'S OWN EYES! FIRST, I'LL NEED A GOSSAMER GOWN!

comics. Fans of Peter David's current Supergirl series, for example, might well conclude swiftly that these stories are crude, childish, simplistic and rather silly. Both American society and the US comics industry have changed enormously in the last 40 years, though; modern comics are written for media-saturated, technology-surrounded teenagers and young adults, whereas these first Supergirl stories were written for young children living in an America where even domestic telephones and TVs were still a luxury, not an inevitability. The sense of wonder they were intended to evoke is part of an older, more innocent world – and if they are read with that setting kept firmly in mind, they may emerge as highly entertaining and finely crafted work.

The superhero comicbooks are often held to have derived from science fiction magazines and the "pulps", men's magazines of the 1930s in which seedy detectives or epic figures such as The Shadow grimly and doggedly waged a usually violent war on crime. But the Superman books of the 1960s, as edited by Mort Weisinger, appear to have used a different model - juvenile literature, with its very different thematic preoccupations. Supergirl, arriving on Earth, is greeted by her older cousin Superman, swiftly given a secret identity, placed in an orphanage and sternly told to keep her true identity hidden from everyone while she practices using her powers. This was in stark contrast to the Golden Age norm, carried on in Silver Age Marvels,whereby a new character became super-powered and immediately expert at using those powers: it placed Supergirl in a setting where her only regular companions were other children; where her heroic activities consisted of good deeds around the orphanage rather than fighting crime; and where she was required to develop considerable ingenuity in using her abilities without revealing their existence.

Ingenuity in using super-powers - using them imaginatively and thoughtfully to solve problems, rather than just to get through punch-ups with villains - was a keynote of the Weisinger-era Superman books, but for the Supergirl series (which remained a backup feature in Action Comics for almost a decade), it was almost a raison d'etre. While the orphanage setting and the emphasis on good deeds call to mind any number of traditional fairy tales and classic children's books (such as L. M. Montgomery's Green Gables series), it's intriguing to note that this element of using wits and abilities to solve problems is oddly reminiscent of some British comics of the 1950s and 1960s. In short, it fitted a major international children's comics' theme of the period; developing one's mental capacities by overcoming obstacles and difficulties involving one's peers, in preparation for the social and career challenges of adult life.

But I don't want to create the impression that these early Supergirl stories were all serious, educative material! That may have been their underlying principle; but on the surface they offered fast-paced, incident-packed and violence-free entertainment to their young readers. Like most DC comics of 40 years ago they were writer-driven; Jim Mooney's simple, uncluttered artwork may look crude to modern readers, but it was intended to move the story along brightly and attractively, not to be full of detail or special effects to be savoured. Given that most of these 8 page stories contain enough plot points and events to make up a four issue miniseries nowadays, a more modern, "realistic" style of art might well have rendered them so dense as to be incomprehensible. As it is, Mooney's straightforward, clear line art serves its purpose admirably – and the printing quality of the Archives editions enhances its unassuming qualities immeasurably by eliminating the shoddy colour registration of the originals.

AND AS THE DISGUISED "SUPERMAN" LEAPS OFF
WE'RE SURE LUCKY YOU CAME ALONG WHEN YOU DID! I WISH YOU'D LET US THANK YOU, SUPERMAN!
SORRY, I'VE GOT TO GET BACK TO MY KNITTING...
10TH STREET

Still, inevitably it's the stories that are the main thing here, not the art. And for the most part they are gentle, rather magical pieces which overwhelmingly display a young girl's sheer enjoyment of being able to do *anything* she wants, so long as no-one else knows. The appeal of this is easily understood; these are little fantasies of empowerment within adult restrictions, for imaginative readers who would be familiar with the adult restrictions but could only dream the power. Sometimes a flash of a writer's self-mocking adult humour occurs, as in a delirious Jerry Siegel-scripted panel where Supergirl, disguised as Superman (don't ask), flies hurriedly away from a scene musing on how she has to get back to her knitting... Occasionally a story goes off the rails; the *Mighty Maid!* story from Action Comics #260 has Superman dressing his 15 year old cousin up in false breasts, false legs, and a generic costume before indulging in some serious smooching with her. It's all staged to avert the destruction of Earth by aliens - yeah, tell it to the judge, Clark...

But there I'm slipping into the socially aware cynicism of the modern reader again – and it really isn't an appropriate response. Taken on their own terms these are charming, innocent, expertly constructed children's tales which, if they can be read as such, should afford enjoyment to anyone. As always, one could wish that the Archives volumes were printed on a more absorbent paper - and sold at lower prices! - so that the flat colour would glint less obtrusively, but that's a minor quibble.

THE BLANK PAGE

Chev says you can get something for nothing...

ON May 4th, it is/was Free Comic Book Day. I know this because it's been advertised on comics websites and in the pages of participating comics publishers' product for the last two months or so. This will doubtless cause a surge of interest amongst many comic fans who - missing the point by their usual large margin - are looking to get something for free, which defeats the purpose of the exercise. I would like David Lapham's reprint of **Stray Bullets # 2**, not only as a fine example of his work, but because it will contain his *Matrix* comic, previously only available on the *Matrix* website. Normally I wouldn't mind paying for such an item, but I'd rather a free promotional copy went to someone who doesn't read comics and possibly sparked their interest further. Then we could both prefer to pay for our comics and this sort of stunt wouldn't be necessary. But that won't happen, because this promotion hasn't exactly gone out of its way to attract the attention of anybody who doesn't read comics in the first place. The first thing I would do is to dump hundreds of thousands of copies of J. Michael Straczynski's **Amazing Spider-Man** into cinemas showing the *Spider-Man* movie. That isn't happening because it would take a bit more effort than simply printing thousands of surplus copies up and letting the retailers do the hard work. Still, it wouldn't be the first time a comics promotion failed to expand beyond the attention of the existing fanbase, because what this industry lacks in foresight it more than makes up for in ineptitude.

BUT THE LAST FEW DAYS HAD BEEN... STUFF I DIDN'T FEEL LIKE BEING FORCED TO RE-EXPERIENCE OVER AND OVER AGAIN, NOT EVEN IF IT WAS IN CODE.
I JUST DIDN'T WANT TO GO THROUGH THE DREAM SEQUENCE.
SO I WENT ELSEWHERE.
BEEP!

The Big Publishers have joined in with their usual shortsightedness. Dark Horse and Image are printing half issues of **Star Wars** and **Tomb Raider** respectively, further propagating the idea that comics only exist as a shadowy offshoot of other, more valid and financially viable media. That someone's introduction to the world of comics could be Dan Jurgens' **Tomb Raider** fills me with a deadening sense of helplessness. DC is offering a reprint of **Justice League Adventures # 1**, strengthening the assumption that comics are just for kids after all, and compounding it with one of the most inept and worthless superhero comics I've ever read. And Marvel, never one to miss an opportunity (and then to fuck it up anyway) is reprinting **Ultimate Spider-Man # 1** (cleverly not featuring Spider-Man at all) for anyone whose recent exposure to the hi-tech bells and whistles *Spider-Man* movie might lead them to explore the flat, 2-D world of his comicbook version. For any film fan over the age of 12 that, I can guarantee you, is not going to happen; kids today wouldn't be seen dead in a comic shop for anything less than a Cameron Diaz blowjob, and even then they'd want to video it. The first thing they'll do after watching *Spider-Man* is to go home and burn a pirate copy from the Internet onto a VCD. This is the new generation that doesn't even read books, much less risk a sound beating from their peers by reading comics. That's your first crippling mistake.

These mainstream comics mentioned above are scheduled to be in comic shops on May 4th. A quick check of the *www.freecomicbookday.com* site shows that other independent publishers "...may be available at selected outlets." Which is to say that the large, profitable companies with their media tie-in and licensed spin-off comics are saturating the day with their reprehensible and juvenile product, leaving the publishers of comics on subjects which the vast majority of people would be interested to read choking on their dirt. Again. This is why no one buys comics: they don't want to read about sci-fi and superheroes; they'd want comics like *Ally McBeal* and *24*, and *The Royal Tenenbaums* and *In The Bedroom*. That such comics exist is only made more ironic by the fact that the people who would buy them in their thousands will never, ever know that they are even out there. That's your second fatal mistake.

You want free comics? Here's what you do. It's not even difficult. Go to your local library; they should have shelves of them in collected editions. You can borrow anything you'd like to read and try it out for nothing, and encourage your friends to do the same. Do the legwork and show your library that comics will be read and enjoyed and they'll be more confident in ordering more.

Log onto the Internet and visit the website of a creator you may be interested in. Carla Speed McNeil at *www.lightspeedpress.com* offers free web versions of her comic **Finder** as a taster of what she does. Oni Press at *www.onipress.com* has a fine selection of its premiere issues available to download. Many features and interviews in **Borderline** carry a creator's website address and it's there for a reason.

In fact, if there's a creator or a publisher out there that piques your interest, chances are that they will have a website designed to encourage that interest, and many of them will offer free sample issues to prove their worth to you. You just have to go and look for them. It wasn't so very long ago that Diamond forbade the listing of website addresses in independent publishers' solicitations. Since a lot of those publishers offer their comics for sale direct from the source, it isn't difficult to deduce why that should have been the case. But nowadays many half- or full-page ads in **Previews** carry web addresses, and if they don't, stick the name of the creator and/or publisher into a decent search engine such as Google and let it take you there.

Free comics. Without having to spend much - if any - money. Without having to be seen in a comic shop. Without having to even get off your arse.

How much easier do we have to make it for you?

LEARNING CURVES

Sarah Littlehales speculates to accumulate

No Brainers

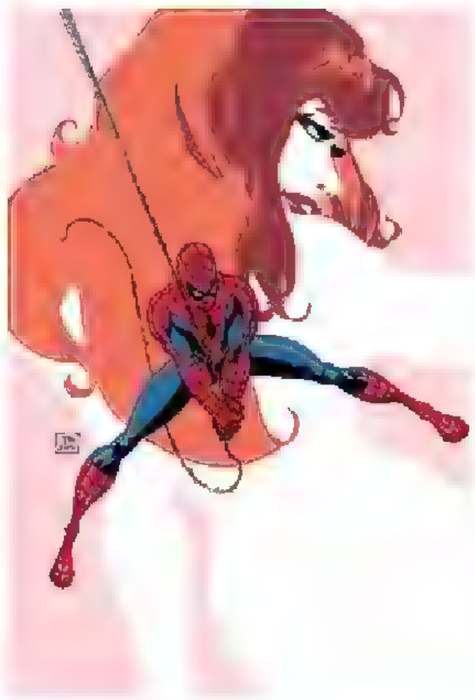
THIS summer is looking as though it'll be the summer of guaranteed sales. A summer when US publishers churn out new titles that you just know are going to sell out within a couple of hours of hitting the shelves. Not that it's a bad thing, mind you. After all the doom and gloom that has been forecast over the future of comic books it's quite refreshing to see these titles solicited and stirring up a buzz.

So here are a few things that are almost guaranteed to rise in popularity, and a few others that you should keep your eye out for.

More Popular Than Your Average Arachnid

It doesn't win you any prizes to know that the *Spider-Man* film is about to be released in theatres around the globe any day now. Normally you'd think that alone would be enough to hike up prices on the comic books, but after the disaster that Marvel suffered in the wake of the extremely popular *X-Men* movie, we can't just assume that sales will automatically rocket. However there is a stable creative drive behind the regular Spider-Man titles at the moment. With the likes of *Babylon 5* creator Michael J. Straczynski on hand, and the continuing success and popularity of Brian M. Bendis' **Ultimate Spider-Man**, it's more than likely that there'll be a renewed passion for the character following the celluloid adventures of Maguire and Dunst.

More specifically, the one Spider-Man title that's certain to out-sell the others is the up-coming **Spider-Man/Black Cat: The Evil That Men Do** miniseries. Written by Kevin Smith, who's neatly won over readers with **Daredevil**, **Green Arrow**, and his own variety of **Clerks** comics, the series is about to be brought to the attention of the masses when Smith appears on US television's *The Tonight Show With Jay Leno*. So on top of the fact that **Daredevil** sold out, and **Green Arrow** went to at least three different printings, the series is being flaunted in front of six million Americans, with the biggest advert of all on the silver screen…



Somehow I think it's going to be popular.

And if the thought of Spider-Man and the Black Cat isn't enough for you, then get ready to order **Spider-Man: Blue** by the renowned duo of Tim Sale & Jeph Loeb. Don't be fooled by the slow sales of **Daredevil: Yellow**; after all that's about to be collected in a hardback edition. Don't forget their work on **Superman: Man For All Seasons** or the classic **Batman: Long Halloween**, but don't let that lull you into a false sense of security. You know it's Spidey. You know Loeb & Sale are popular. You know you want it.

More Than Meets The Eye

The series that was a guaranteed hit before the publisher even had the rights to it was, of course, **Transformers: Generation One**. Excessive amounts had been pre-ordered, making it Diamond's number one comic. Not bad for the first issue!

There are those who think that it's only for the 20-30 year olds, that it would be popular on nostalgia value alone. But the stunning art with anime-style Dreamwave colours makes it look like it was stolen right out of some modern day anime, and the writing follows in the gritty tradition set by Simon Furman during his classic run on Marvel's version of the title. All in all, it looks pretty, it reads well, and it makes you feel 20 years younger.

And if you slab it and have it graded by the CGC, you can sell it for over $350 online. Just don't feel sorry for the poor guy who pays hundreds of dollars for something he can't appreciate.

Dirty Business

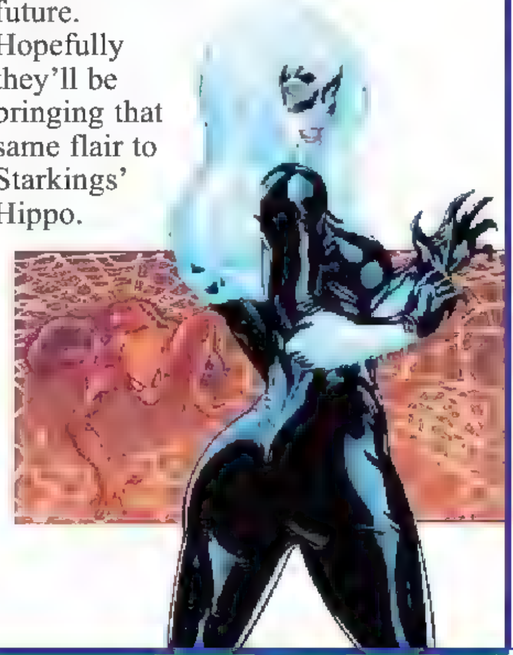
If you enjoyed **Preacher**, the recent Marvel Knights **Punisher**, and the **New X-Men** then you'll like these. **The Filth** from DC Comics is Grant Morrison doing the fucked-up stories that he can't get away with using established characters, with detailed and gritty art provided by Gary Erskine and Chris Weston. Image's **Pro** is Garth Ennis, backed up by the artistic talents of Amanda Conner and Jimmy Palmiotti, telling the story of a smoking, swearing prostitute with super powers. Whether it's a witty post-modern comment on superheroes in the comics medium or just another gimmick, it's guaranteed to be a nice little seller.

Keep an eye out for Richard Starkings' lettering company Comicraft's entry into publishing with **Hip Flask: Unnatural Selection**. Originally a Hippo Indiana Jones-style adventurer used to advertise Comicraft, Hip Flask is now transformed into an intense look at man's relation with the fragile balance of nature and genetic sciences in the future, and the consequences of tampering with them. This is no cute and cuddly romp with talking anthropomorphic manga-like animals!

Jose Ladronn is bringing to it the uniquely luscious blend of computer art and watercolours that made him so popular on the second **Inhumans** series from Marvel Knights. To top off the

powerfully detailed and dark textures, Ladronn is teaming up again with his old **Cable** writer Joe Casey. To put any concerns at rest - while Casey's work on **Uncanny X-Men** was far from impressive, both he and Ladronn did some fine work together on Marvel's X-soldier from the future.

Hopefully they'll be bringing that same flair to Starkings' Hippo.



MAN ON A MISSION

Martin Shipp's vision of a better comics industry

SOME remember where they were when Kennedy was shot, some have the memory of Princess Diana's death indelibly burned into the "I Was At..." file in their minds. I have the indelible phantasm ever-present in the back of my consciousness of exactly where and when I realised that Neil Gaiman's Sandman was crap.

That discovery came as a blow; it carried the shock of realisation that must also accompany such things as finding out you were raised by gypsies and are the rightful heir to the throne of Scotland, or

understanding that in order for you to exist your parents must at some point have... you know... *done it*. It also carried the threat of Comic Reader Stigma; the distinct possibility that to speak this heresy may lead to exclusion from your peer group, resulting in blindness, mental simplicity and a lonely unloved death. But hey, that's going to happen anyway, especially if you read Sandman, so what the hell.

The Shock Of The Bad has hit again since then, as it unavoidably will. Starman, for instance, was quite enjoyable until suddenly, in the middle of an issue somewhere around the mid-teens of the run, I was struck by the fact that the cadences of the dialogue didn't ring true, that stresses *were* being put *in* the wrong places. Nobody speaks realistically in a comicbook, but in Starman nobody spoke realistic comicbook. The writer, James Robertson or Robinson or something that I'm sure our friendly production chaps will find out for me [*that's Robinson - Friendly Production Ed.*], suffered from Kirby Dialogue Syndrome. He had a tin ear. And you know what? I checked out a recent issue of JSA, and it had got no better.

A few days ago, I snuggled

up with a nice cup of tea, some decent chocolate and a pile of comics. One of them was the most recent issue of Alan Moore's Promethea. About seven pages in, there was that familiar glazing-over of the eyes, the slight feeling of impatience, the partly-suppressed wish to just get the job of reading this *over with* so I could move on to something more deserving of my time and effort. The Shock Of The Bad had hit me again: as much as it attracts critical praise, as many lovely award nominations as it may have attached to it like barnacles to a hull, Promethea was quite simply Not a Good Comic.

The question I have to ask is: whose fault is this? Is it Moore's, for dragging a perfectly serviceable story out for approximately fifteen years longer than was necessary? Was it his editor's, for allowing such self-indulgence? Is it DC/Wildstorm/ABC's, for publishing the thing in the first place? Or could it be mine, for sitting back and thinking "This is an Alan Moore comic. He wrote some fine stuff in the past. This must also be top-notch"?

It's my fault. Every time an issue of Promethea has been published, I've bought it. Despite the nagging feeling that I don't especially want to read a detailed treatise on How Magic Works And How Everything There Ever Was And Ever Will Be Is Connected (I can listen to XTC's *We're All Light* and get the same thing in just under four minutes). Despite repeatedly thinking "Well, it looks darn pretty even if the story's dragging". Despite having dropped every other ABC book because they haven't been as much entertainment as one would hope. Still, every time, I've slapped down good coin for this book.

Since being Shocked, I've been trying to find out if I'm alone. I'm not. Ask around in your comic retailer (if you're the type who talks to others in your local retailer and not just one of the incredibly silent ones); in fact, just ask your local retailer and find out how many people buy this comic not on its merits but out of loyalty to either the title or to Moore. Check out a message board or two.

I don't like saying all this. I'd love to continue buying Promethea - and I'm not stating that I won't - but my admiration for Moore and his work isn't enough to keep me locked into the pattern.

And this is something you should consider, not just about this one title, but about every comic you read. Is it turning you on? Do you look forward to seeing it? Does it make your heart sing? If it was your girlfriend/boyfriend/husband/wife, would you be continuing the relationship or would you be considering joining a gym, buying some new clothes and re-entering the dating arena?

It breaks my heart to say it, but it looks like it's over for Sophie and I. It's not her, it's me. She'll be okay, she'll find other boys. And I hope we can still be friends. But, you know, I just don't feel the same way about her any more.

Having said that, do you think I could keep the costume?

WHY YOU SHOULD BE READING

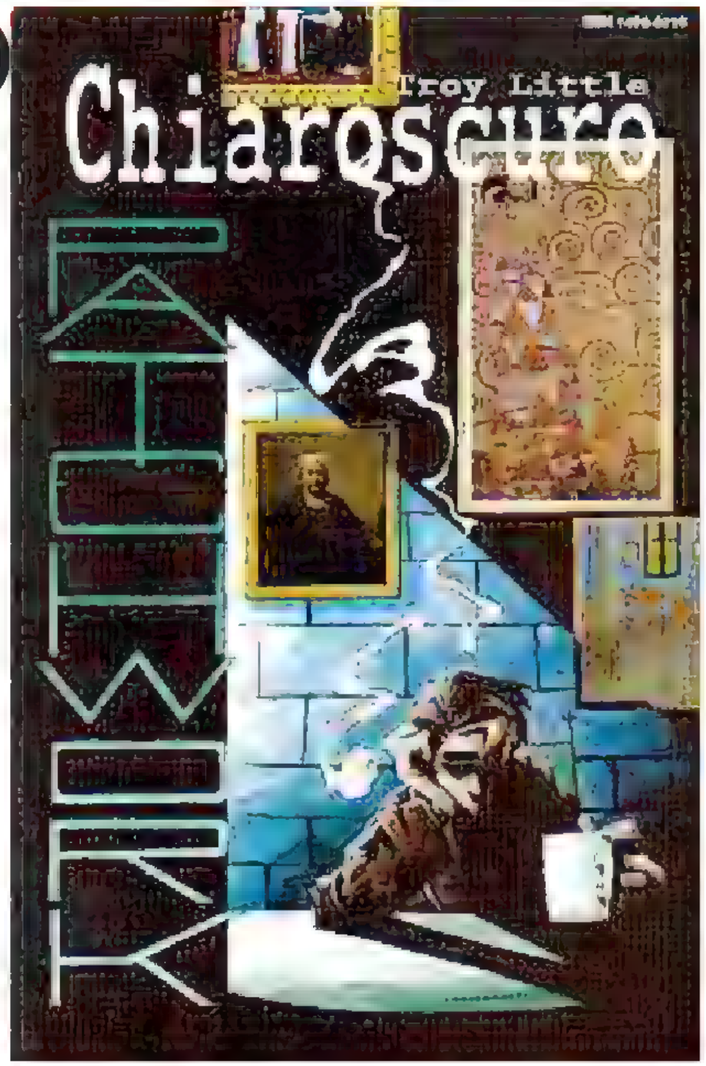
Troy Little entered the field with Chiaroscuro, a self-published comic that garnered a Xeric grant and a good critical reception. Borderline's Andrew Cheverton caught up with the writer/artist as he finished working on issue 4 of the quarterly title.

CHIAROSCURO (Key-Air-Oh-Sku-Ro) noun, 1; the artistic distribution of light and dark masses in a picture - from Italian,* chiaro *CLEAR* + oscuro *OBSCURE

Borderline: Troy, first things first: can you give us a little background on yourself?
Troy Little: Let's see, I was born and raised in Prince Edward Island and attended art school at Sheridan College in Oakville, Ontario. I currently reside in Ottawa and somehow ended up working in animation on and off for the last 6 years. I began working on my comic Chiaroscuro back in September of 2000, which I self-published almost exactly one year later and had the honour of receiving a Xeric grant for. And here I am today putting together the last bit of issue 4 and somehow managing to work in animation simultaneously.

BL: Which animated series do you work on, and what specifically is it that you do?
TL: I started out working in the layout department (drawing backgrounds) on a lot of children's shows from Nelvana like *Rupert* and *Franklin the Turtle*. I've managed to move my way around and do different jobs: recently I've done a little bit of key animation on John Kricfalusi's *The Ripping Friends* and have been heavily involved in the production of *Untalkative Bunny*, a show created by Graham Falk here in Ottawa. Right now I'm up to my neck working as assistant director and supervisor on the design, layout and key animation for 4 half-hour specials of the Bunny.

BL: What can you tell us about the characters and story of Chiaroscuro?
TL: Chiaroscuro is sort of a blanket title, which encompasses whatever stories I want to tell in the comic medium. The first story is called *Patchwork* and should run around 30-odd issues. On a simple level the story revolves around an unemployed artist called Steven Patch struggling with a blank canvas, but that's really a superficial synopsis. The characters are fictional but I want them to project a sense of familiarity. People have written to



me either saying how they can relate to so-and-so, or know someone just like them. I guess that means I'm succeeding in that department.

BL: Steven is a vaguely unlikeable character, yet at the same time sympathetic. Is he drawn from life?
TL: He's an amalgamation and amplification of me, and people I've met. He's like an old friend you don't care for very much. Most of my close friends are characters in and of themselves, and a year or two before starting Chiaroscuro I was working on a comic and using them as characters in the story. The problem I discovered (after 17 finished pages) was I couldn't fictionalise them enough to tell a story. So I vowed not to base any characters in *Patchwork* on real people.

BL: Congratulations on the Xeric grant.
TL: Thank you, I feel very privileged to have received the grant my first time doing a comic. I was rather unsure what the response would be, not a lot actually happens in the beginning of the story but so far it has been overwhelmingly positive. The grant I'm certain has helped; it gives you an extra little bit of attention that might incline someone to give your book a shot.

BL: Jumping into the industry with a proposed 30 issue storyline is certainly ambitious. Has the Xeric grant made it any more achievable than it may have been before you published #1?
TL: I think it's as achievable as I desire it to be. The grant helps in covering the printing and promotion for a few issues and the attention from it will probably help sales, but ultimately I have to be the one to sit and do all the work. So the only thing stopping me really would be, well - me. Such are the joys of self-publishing. Now perhaps if Diamond decides it doesn't want to distribute the book anymore (knock on lots of wood), it's still up to me whether or not to continue, and I'm certain I'd find a way (still knocking...) to at least finish the story. I'm doing this primarily out of love, so my motivation isn't financial (not saying a truckload a cash wouldn't be nice). I guess that's a good thing as I think I could've run through the Alternative Press Expo swinging two cats and not come remotely close to hitting a financially successful publisher, Jeff Smith aside.

BL: Was the Alternative Press Expo your first convention as a creator?
TL: I went to San Diego just before my first issue came out. All I had was some promotional bookmarks that I handed out and I spent most of the time in various seminars getting a feel for what I was getting myself into.
APE was the first convention I attended from the perspective of an actual creator. It was really great to see that many people all into the small press. I mean, San Diego was great and to someone like myself who had never been to a large scale convention before, well - it's pretty overwhelming. The great thing about APE was you could see everything in an afternoon and actually have room to stand and chat with the creators about their work. It was pretty neat having people stop by to have their comics signed or do sketches, and just talk to people who are into what you do. It felt more intimate than San Diego.

BL: You've said that not a lot happens at the start of Chiaroscuro, but I was impressed by how you make more of what story there is, and pay it off wonderfully with the final page. How much time do you spend structuring an issue, and do you do that at the scripting

BL: In the back of issue 1 you credit Dave Sim's Cerebus with giving you the impetus to get Chiaroscuro off the ground. What exactly was it with Cerebus - as opposed to any other comic - that provoked you?
TL: Cerebus Guide to Self-Publishing. That "comic" was like a slap to the back of my head. Not so much the "How To" stuff, but more the idea behind it all. That you can write, draw, publish and hold complete control over your own work if you'd stop being such a lazy fuck. Can it be done successfully? I just read issue #276 of Cerebus, so I don't hold a lot of doubts it *can* be done. On top of that, it to me is one of the finest examples of the potential comic books have in its layout, amazing use of lettering, painstaking illustrations and the scope of its storyline. Never been done before, never will be again, I'm certain. It's an endless source for inspiration for me.

BL: Your lettering seems more reminiscent of Dave Sim than anything else you do. I'm constantly surprised at how emotive his lettering can be, and yet nobody else (with the possible exception of James Owen) has really appropriated it to enhance their own comics.
TL: Yeah, lettering in comic books doesn't have to be text and pictures. It should work together as a whole. Playing visually with the lettering helps to bring off the feel of what these characters are saying (or implying). Sim is the master of that. He makes us all look like amateurs when it comes to lettering.

stage or while drawing it out?
TL: I start by figuring out what part a particular issue is going to play in the larger picture of the story and write a rough outline. Then I start working with dialogue and developing a mental image of what the book may look like. I like to treat the actual coupling of artwork and storytelling in an organic manner where one page leads to the next, not forcing the pace of the narrative. I've read too many comics that can't arrive at a synthesis between writer and artist and usually one suffers at the expense of the other; I'm trying to avoid that. I'll thumbnail out a group of pages before I sit down to any real drawing and make sure everything gels, but even that is subject to change if the pacing isn't there when I do begin the actual artwork. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't.

BL: Taking another lead from Sim, are you looking at trade paperbacks anytime soon, to try to penetrate the book market?
TL: My best guess is, you won't see a trade for about two years. I have three reasons for this: firstly, Chiaroscuro currently comes out four times a year, which leads to the second reason; I want to have a sufficient amount of work available to warrant a collected volume (I hate paying $20 for 4 comics "collected"). And thirdly, I believe the story will flow better in a larger volume.

BL: You have a website and an online diary up (at www.meanwhilestudios.com): do you find this helpful in terms of reader feedback?
TL: Definitely. When I started out and was trying to get the book noticed by posting on message boards people would respond with, "Where can I get a look at what you're talking about?" So I built a website. Now people can see what it's all about before they take a gamble and buy your book, and it's been great in that people who jumped in late can contact me and get the issues they missed. It's a fantastic tool for the small press publisher and allows us worldwide access to potential fans. It's a great way to gauge the public response to your work as well; no hovering around the mailbox wondering if someone took the time to compose a letter, buy a stamp and send a note telling you that you suck. They can tell you that you suck in mere seconds thanks to email!

BL: The watercolour work on the covers is quite striking. Was there ever the choice or option to do Chiaroscuro in colour?
TL: I prefer the high contrast of black and white for the interiors. It's so stark. Colour comics can be fantastic *if* the colourist knows what he/she is doing, but unfortunately they are too few and far between. I can't stand the slick computer look most books have. I find there's more honesty in the linework of a black and white comic, why try and bury it in a PhotoShop filter?

BL: What comics are you reading at the moment, and do you take inspiration from any of them?
TL: My biggest inspiration in comics comes from Cerebus. That's a huge influence without (I hope) Chiaroscuro appearing in any way as a Dave Sim knockoff. I'm not interested in emulating anyone's particular style, but I do put into my book those elements in comics that I find appeal to me.
I really like Dave Cooper's work, his fine art paintings are awesome; super nice guy to boot. Craig Thompson's Goodbye, Chunky Rice is one of my favourite graphic novels. Terry Moore, Jeff Smith, Eddie Campbell and Julie Doucet are all regular pickups at the comic shop.

BL: Is there anything outside comics that influences your work?
TL: William S. Burroughs is probably my top author (if you can properly call him that), along with Kerouac, Salinger and Steinbeck. Right now I'm reading Miracle of the Rose by Jean Genet, which I picked up at City Lights bookstore in San Francisco during APE.
Movies; I really like David Fincher's films (apart from *The Game*). I grew up on *Star Wars* like every healthy well-adjusted person and I'm giddy as a schoolgirl for *Episode II*. David Lynch is probably the biggest influence on my work. I just love his movies.

BL: You've credited your girlfriend Carol Duncan with editing Chiaroscuro; what would you describe as her contribution to the book?
TL: Carol's the person who keeps me from looking like an idiot. I can't spell to save my life, so she goes over the issue when I'm finished and checks my spelling and points out grammatical problems. On top of a mere credit on the book, she deserves a medal for putting up with me working all the time and then having occasional fits of depression about it. Carol's a writer herself, mostly for animation but she's working her way into the print medium, so she can relate to the horror of creation and helps keep me together when I have "one of those days".

BL: Thank you for taking the time to talk to us, Troy. Is there anything you would like to say before we finish?
TL: Thanks; it was fun. Can I just say this is the first time I've ever been on television?

FORT FOR THE DAY

In June, there is the eagerly-awaited release of Fort! Prophet of the Unexplained – a new four issue miniseries from Dark Horse by screenwriter Peter Lenkov and artist Frazer Irving. Borderline's Jay Eales spoke to the creators about the project...

Borderline: Peter, for those of our readers who aren't familiar with your past exploits, could you tell us a bit about yourself?
Peter Lenkov: First and foremost, I am a huge comic book fan. This is why I'm here. Fort is the second comic book I created. The first, R.I.P.D., was such a good experience, I asked Mike Richardson to let me dive in again. Thankfully he obliged.

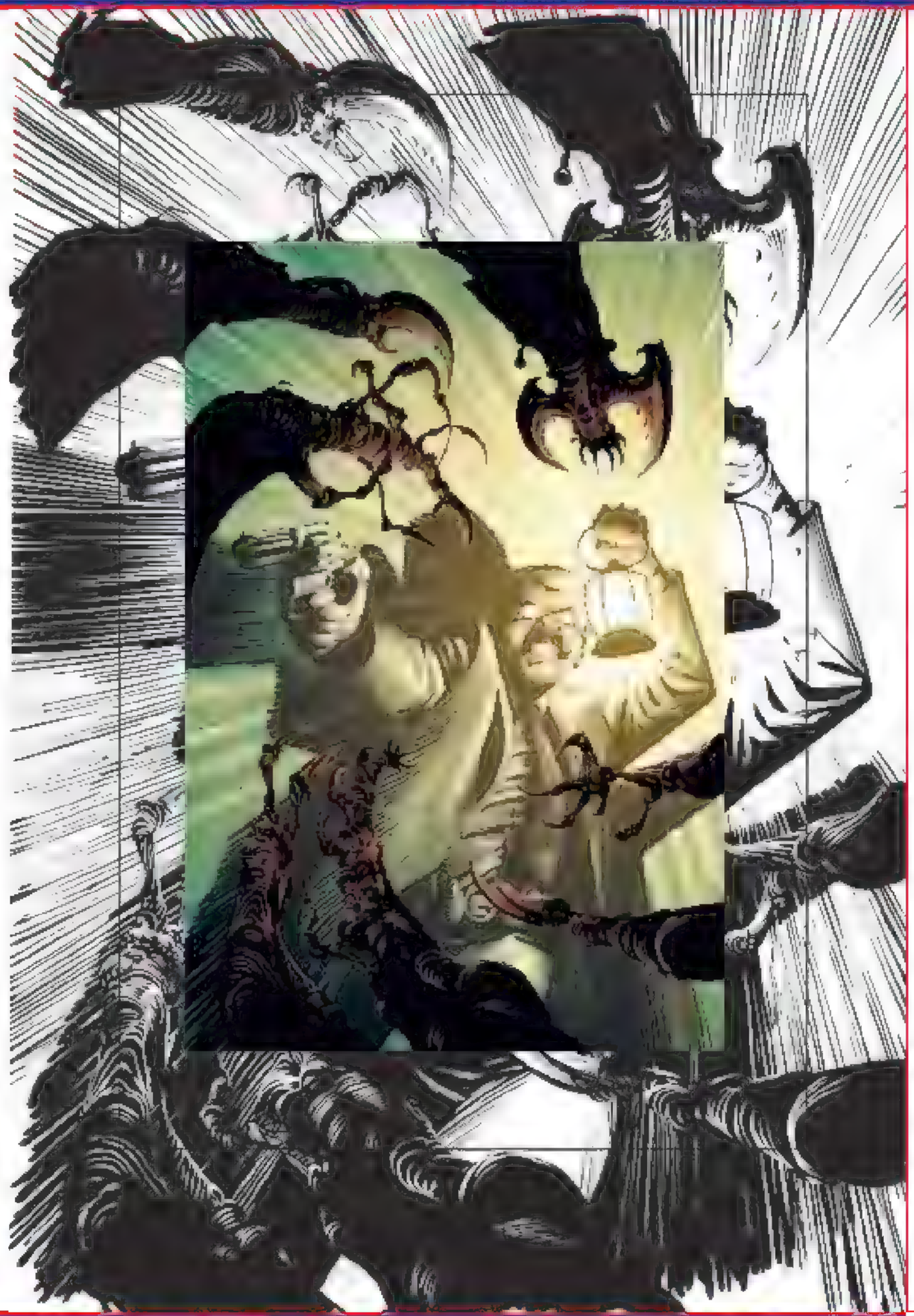
My day job is as a screenwriter and producer. I work in both film and television. Some of my credits include writing *Demolition Man* for Warner Bros, producing *Son-In-Law* for Hollywood Pictures, writing/producing *La Femme Nikita* for television. Currently, I am writing a movie for Warner Bros. and Joel Silver (producer of *The Matrix*, *Lethal Weapon* and *Demolition Man*) and a second movie for RKO. I also did a production rewrite on *ECKS vs. SEVER*, the Antonio Banderas/Lucy Liu flick that comes out at the end of summer 2002... as well as a production rewrite on *Psychic*, currently in the process of being cast. R.I.P.D. was optioned by Larry Gordon and Lloyd Levin (*Tomb Raider*)... and I wrote the screenplay for that as well. Larry and Lloyd are in the process of trying to cast it and attach a director. Hopefully it'll happen soon.

BL: Frazer - Regular Borderline readers may already be familiar with you, but I thought it would be nicer to let you introduce yourself to the nice laydeez and gennelmen, in your own words, if you would...
Frazer Irving: Hmmm. Hey ladies... Wanna see my "etchings"? What do you mean, not *that* kind of crowd? Who *else* reads comics?

Oh, okay... Well, I'm a young, spunky British artist, notorious for bringing horror and naked ladies to the pages of 2000AD over the past two years. I draw monsters, aliens, Cthulhu, monsters, Judge Death, naked ladies, monsters, and bug things. Oh, and superheroes on LSD.

BL: Fort! has been compared with the 2000AD serial Necronauts*, also illustrated by Frazer, which, because it hasn't yet been collected in trade form ,is probably not that well-known outside the UK. Are you familiar with that series at all, Peter, and if so, could you tell me how it differs from Fort?*
PL: You threw me for a loop here. I didn't even know about this until you mentioned it - just went online to find info on it. Yeah, it sounds like we use some of the same characters. Looks like this comic was set in 1929. Ours is 1899, at a time when the world is about to change, moving into the 20th century. Fort was a hero for the times. A man with an open mind - willing to question the establishment. He was a pioneer in many ways - someone who helped usher in the new millennium. Hard to comment on the differences until I actually read the comic.

BL: Frazer - were you wary about signing on to do another story where two of the protagonists are Charles Fort and H. P. Lovecraft, so soon after Necronauts?
FI: Hey, I got no problem there. I *am* wary of being typecast (already had the "Hey, I love your work but I don't have any horror stories at the moment" reply from at least one editor) as the black and white horror guy, though the other



strips I do in 2000AD are hopefully balancing it out. Basically, Fort is a very different story from the *Necronauts* (as I'm sure Peter will explain) and so it's only surface details that are similar. But if ye liked the art on *Necronauts*, then that very surface is still there.

But I *am* versatile, folks, and all offers *will* be considered. Even porn.

BL: Peter, I presume that you'll be taking a few liberties with the historical figures who appear in the story, in the name of creating a great ripping yarn? I suspect that Charles Fort was more of a mild-mannered librarian than an Indiana Jones, and H. P. Lovecraft as a street urchin seems something of a departure from how we've usually seen him...
PL: Yeah... I took some liberties. Our book is more like "From the Files of..." These are the cases Fort could not put down on paper for fear of being considered a heretic. Remember what the times were like in 1899. And sure, Fort was a mild-mannered librarian by day - but come sundown, he was on the prowl... investigating the unknown... keeping the streets of New York safe. H.P., inspired by his adventures with Fort, took to writing horror stories.

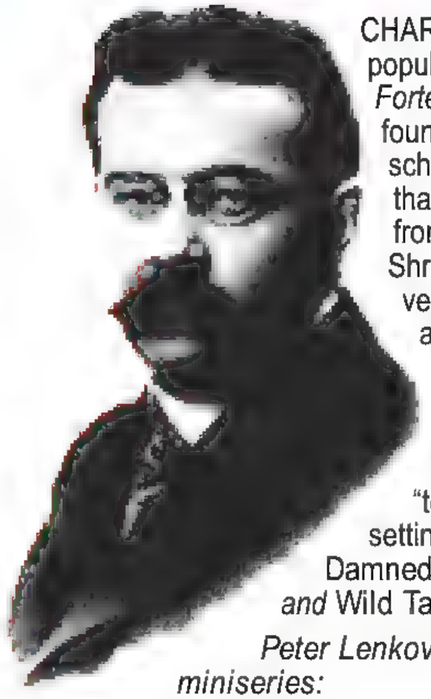
BL: Would you care to say something about your collaboration on Fort? Any plans to work on further projects at this stage?
PL: Frazer is a genius. And I don't just throw that word around. He really brought this thing to life. I would be honored to work with him again. Hopefully we'll get the opportunity.

FI: He writes em, I draws em. Dave Land [Editor of Fort] smiles and says nice things to us both. As long as the ideas and opportunities are there, I think this is a good formula for Fun Fun Fun for future projects. Now, if they came to us and said they wanted *me* to write and Peter to *draw*, well, it might get sticky...

Fort! Prophet of the Unexplained #1 (of 4) will be published by Dark Horse Comics on June 12th. Each issue will have 24 pages, and be priced at $2.99.

FORTEAN TIMES

THE JOURNAL OF STRANGE PHENOMENA



CHARLES Fort is commemorated by the popular UK-published monthly magazine *Fortean Times, [www.forteantimes.com]*, founded in 1973 and dedicated to the scholarly exploration of all things Fortean; that is to say, any unexplained phenomena, from stigmata to crop circles, from the Turin Shroud to improbably-shaped root vegetables. While scientists were sceptical about the unexplained, Fort in turn was sceptical about any science that ignored or suppressed evidence that did not fit the world-view of the scientist in question. He coined the term "teleportation" and wrote four books setting out his beliefs: The Book Of The Damned (1919), New Lands (1923), Lo! (1931) *and* Wild Talents (1932).

Peter Lenkov, from Dark Horse's publicity for the miniseries:
"Fort was basically doing the work of *Kolchak: the Night Stalker* and the *X-Files* gang while living in 19th Century New York. And of course, he had to keep his investigations quiet, so he wouldn't be branded a heretic. So, with that incredible framework, I began to imagine what documented "situations" Charles Fort may have been involved in but couldn't afford to commit to paper for obvious reasons – cases that were way too fantastical to reveal. And that's where the comic comes in. I want the comic to be an extension of Fort's work, his most exciting, controversial cases, the ones he could not declassify, the ones that were so strange and out there that he had to keep them to himself - until now."

From Dark Horse's solicitation copy:
It's the end of the 19th Century and the city of New York has been plagued by fish falling from the sky, strange lights in the night, bizarre collections of microbial goo, and vanishing citizens! It's up to one man to expose the truth behind these events... Charles Fort!

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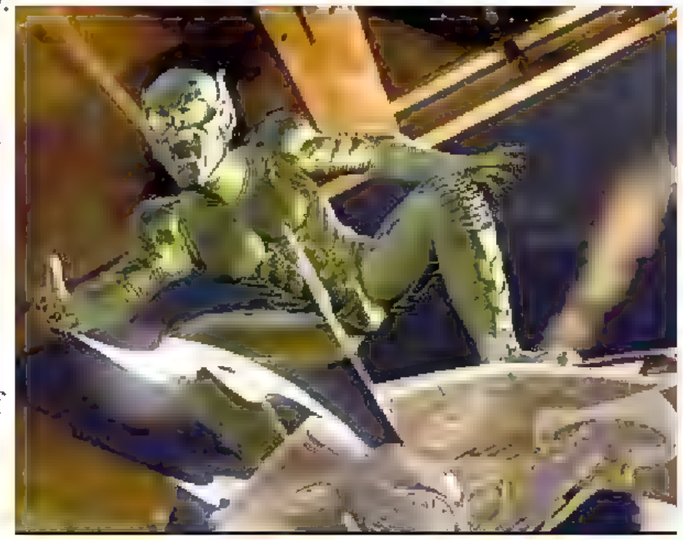
phil.hall@borderline.mediahall.co.uk

With the release of Sam Raimi's much-vaunted Marvel project, Borderline's Tom Lennon has a go at unravelling the tangled web of the Spider-Man *movie...*

WITH GREAT POWER COMES GREAT LITIGATION

IT'S not uncommon for comics fans to experience a certain degree of trepidation just prior to the release of a superhero movie. After all, they've become accustomed to disappointment as Hollywood - more often than not - fails to transform comic book chemistry into big screen magic. With the forthcoming *Spider-Man* film, though, things might be a little different. Instead of wondering "How good will this be?" or "Will they get it right?" they may find themselves asking "Have they really made a *Spider-Man* movie, or is it all just an elaborate hoax?"

Granted, this may reek of conspiracy theory paranoia brought on by overexposure to *X-Files* boxed sets, but for those of us who have followed Spider-Man's long and sordid trek to the local multiplex it all makes perfect sense. This, after all, has been a seventeen-year journey characterized by false starts, crushed hopes, litigation, indecision and delay. It's left a trail of broken promises, bankrupt companies and bruised, bloated egos. It's a tale so convoluted that it makes the Clone Saga look like a textbook exercise in tight plotting and brevity. Is it any wonder that some of us are reluctant to believe a *Spider-Man* movie actually exists until we've seen the finished film with our own two eyes?



The whole sorry affair began in 1985 when Menahem Golan, the flamboyant head of independent film studio Cannon, bought a five-year Spider-Man movie option from Marvel for a reported figure of $225,000. Cannon had made its name by producing a string of low-budget, action-fodder flicks featuring b-movie aristocrats like Charles Bronson and Chuck Norris. Golan, though, had plans for the studio and believed that a Spider-Man franchise could turn Cannon into a major Hollywood contender. He earmarked $15m for the project - a princely sum for an outfit that considered a $5m movie budget to be a splurge - and spent over $2m nurturing up to ten different Spidey screenplays.

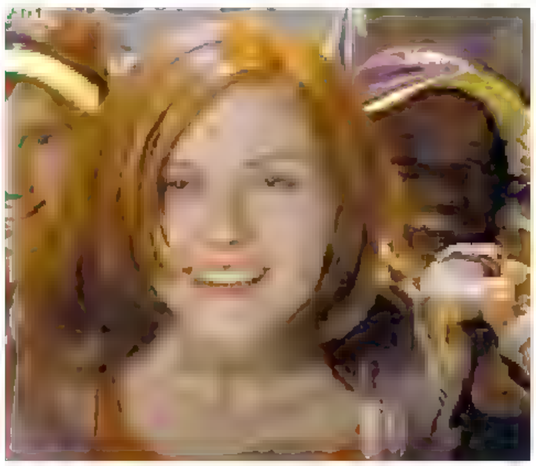
Unfortunately, Cannon's capital was no match for Golan's ambition. There was a string of flops including - ironically enough - *Superman IV: The Quest For Peace*, in which the British town of Milton Keynes doubled (unconvincingly) for Metropolis, and following an investigation into its accounting by US regulators the company was taken over by Pathé Communications. Despite this, Golan still held onto the hope that a Spidey movie could change his fortunes, and when he left Pathé in 1989 he managed to retain the rights as part of his severance package.

After negotiating an extension on his soon-to-expire option with Marvel, he tried to raise further capital by selling the Spider-Man television and

home video rights to Viacom and Columbia TriStar respectively. Even that wasn't enough to bankroll the movie, so in 1990 Golan sold his golden goose to US independent studio Carolco for $5m and an agreement that he would receive a production credit in the final film.

And that's where James Cameron came into the picture.

Cameron was developing *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* for Carolco when he first expressed an interest in making a Spider-Man movie. In 1991 Carolco offered Cameron $3m to write and direct this "dream project" and he subsequently produced a "scriptment" - an elaborate proposal with dialogue - that outlined his ideas for the feature film. Cameron's film would focus on 17 year-old Peter Parker, his transformation into Spider-Man and his subsequent confrontation with arch-nemesis The Green Goblin. Staying close to the source material, Cameron saw Spider-Man as the classic rites-of-passage story, with Peter's transformation from wallflower to superhero acting as a super-powered metaphor for adolescence. The film would be dark and edgy: in one scene Spidey kills a corrupt cop and, later, loses his cherry whilst indulging in a spot of spider-web bondage with Mary Jane Watson atop the Brooklyn Bridge.



While some die-hard fans had reservations about these elements, most were overjoyed by the prospect of a James Cameron Spidey film. This wasn't going to be a typical low-budget Marvel movie directed by some anonymous rent-a-hack: this was the real deal, a big budget flick made by one of Hollywood's premier sci-fi movie makers. As pre-production started, there was the typical flurry of casting speculation. Names like Charlie Sheen, Keanu Reeves and Michael Biehn (the Cameron regular who played Reece in *The Terminator*) were bandied around as front-runners for the titular role. Jack Nicholson was considered an ideal - though obvious – shoe-in for The Green Goblin, while "Austrian Oak" Arnold Schwarzenegger was believed to be in talks for the part of Doctor Octopus. Promotional flyers, posters and keyrings began to circulate, featuring the bold proclamation: **Spider-Man: A James Cameron Film. Coming In 1993**.

Which, of course, it didn't.

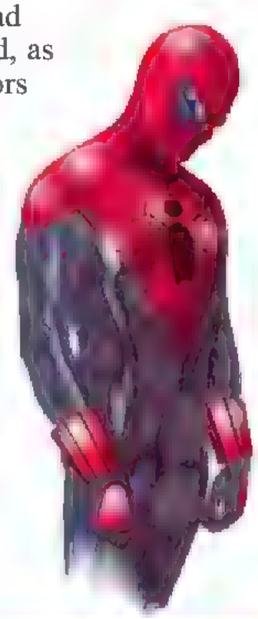
Golan was furious that his name wasn't mentioned in any of the promotional hype. Cameron's contract gave him final approval over the film's credits, and Cameron didn't think that Golan - who, to be fair, was no longer involved with the project - had earned the title of producer. According to Golan, Carolco tried to pressurize him into relinquishing his claim by threatening to withhold part of his $5m fee. The row escalated and in 1993 Golan and his new production company, 21st Century Films, filed a lawsuit against Carolco to revoke the contract. And that's when the trouble started.

As pre-production halted and litigation commenced, others soon wanted in on the action. Carolco sued Viacom and Columbia TriStar to nullify the TV & video rights they'd bought from Golan. Viacom and Columbia counter-sued Carolco, 21st Century Films and Marvel. Then, MGM - part of the Pathé group - entered the fray, claiming that Golan wasn't entitled to the film rights, so they sued 21st Century Films, Viacom, Columbia and Marvel for fraud.

By 1994, five separate Spider-Man-related lawsuits were brought before the Los Angeles Court, six different studios were laying claim to the project, while eighteen separate written arrangements were at issue. No wonder Spidey in the comics had ditched his former best superhero buddy The Human Torch, and now turned to vigilante-lawyer Daredevil for advice.

Cameron, meanwhile, was getting impatient. He started work on his next film *True Lies* [1994] hoping that, by the time it was in the can, the Spider-Mess would have sorted itself out. Needless to say, it didn't. So he got to work on his next project, *Titanic*, in 1996, still hoping for a resolution. During this period, Cameron signed an exclusive contract with 20th Century Fox which, effectively, added another strand to the tangled web: whoever won the Spider-Man litigation war would still need to negotiate with Fox to secure Cameron's services.

The Battle for Spider-Man raged on, and it was starting to claim some major casualties. Carolco were in bad financial shape and, as disgruntled creditors became more vociferous and rivals more predatory, the prospect of a Spider-Man franchise soon turned into their last, great hope for survival. By 1995 the company had folded, and the still-contested



rights were sold to MGM to offset a $12.3m debt. Golan's 21st Century Films was next to bite the bullet; then in December 1996 Marvel Entertainment Group filed for Chapter 11 protection from its creditors. A legal battle had turned into a war of attrition.

The Gordian Knot was finally cut in 1999 when Marvel emerged from court having re-secured the Spider-Man movie rights, and in March that year they were sold to Sony Pictures for a reported $7m fee. The war was over and now there was a movie to be made.

Litigation, however, now gave way to indecision. Cameron - basking in Oscar glory as the self-proclaimed "King of the World" - had already thrown in the towel, so the hunt was on for a new director. It took Sony chiefs more than a year to reach a decision and, after wading through a list of talent that included the Warchowski Brothers (*The Matrix*), Ron Howard (*A Beautiful Mind*), Tim Burton (*Batman*) and - bizarrely enough - *Fight Club*'s David Fincher, they finally opted for cult filmmaker Sam Raimi. The screenplay itself went through a dozen rewrites, and the casting process, too, was fraught with delay. Jim Carrey, Jude Law, Chris O'Donnell and Nicholas Brendon were just a few of Hollywood's potential Spider-Men, while comic2film wannabe Nicolas Cage and (believe it or not) Kevin Costner were shortlisted as likely Green Goblins. Once Raimi had decided on casting the talented but relatively unknown Tobey Maguire as the lead, he then had to struggle with a studio eager to cast a more "bankable" star.

The problems didn't stop once the cameras started rolling. A stuntman was killed during the making of the film, the release date was put back six months to allow for additional special effects work and a teaser trailer that featured the World Trade Centre had to be pulled following the September 11 tragedy.

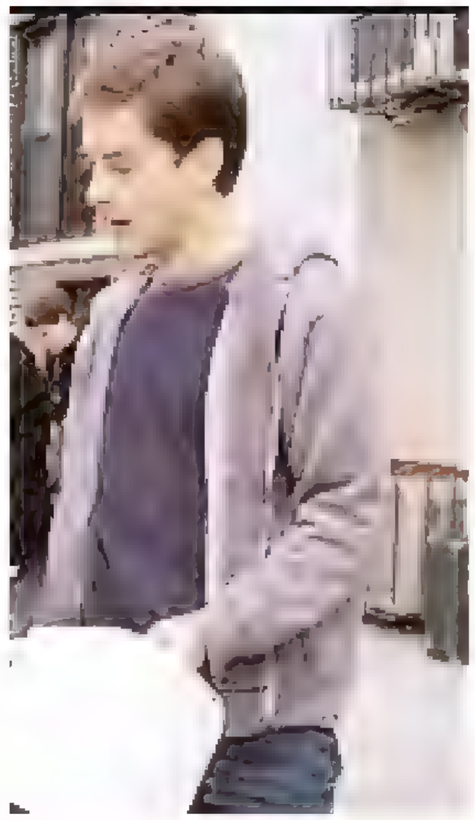
Now, after seventeen long years, *Spider-Man* is finally on its way to a multiplex near you. By anyone's standard, that's a long wait for a movie, but perhaps we should be

grateful that it didn't arrive any sooner. Judging from their previous forays into the genre - namely *Superman IV* and *Captain America* - God only knows what kind of film Cannon would have made. And the James Cameron Spidey movie? Many comics fans regard this as the superhero movie equivalent of Orson Welles' Don Quixote, and there was even a chapter devoted to the subject in David Hughes's excellent book *The Greatest Sci-Fi Films Never Made*. While there's no doubt that Cameron's film would have featured some breathtaking set pieces, it's worth remembering that he initially wanted to cast 35 year-old Michael Biehn as 17 year-old Peter Parker and, even worse, in 1997 seriously considered *Titanic* star Leonardo DiCaprio for the title role.

Perhaps on some parallel universe these versions were actually made, and maybe the comics fans over there now envy us. On Planet Cannon they got to see Spidey swing unconvincingly through the low-rise concrete canyons of Milton Keynes, while on Planet Cameron they had to listen to a power-ballad rendition of "Is he tough? Listen bud - he's got radioactive blood" by Celine Dion.

It remains to be seen whether or not Sam Raimi's take on the character turns out to be the best of all possible Spider-Men. As the release date gets closer, though, some of us are getting edgy. Even though we've seen the trailers and have read the glowing endorsements, we still find it hard to believe that - after seventeen years of false starts, broken promises and dashed hopes - a Spider-Man movie is finally within our grasp. Could it be a hoax? Is it just an imaginary story? Nah. The film's in the can, it'll be released in May and we'll soon be watching it at our local multiplex. It's too late now for anything to go wrong.

Well, that's assuming the car doesn't break down on the way to the cinema.



VERDICT COMICS REVIEWS

THIS MONTH'S JURY:

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Mark Clapham
Jennifer Cole
Kelvin Green
Phil Hall
Rol Hirst
Mike Kidson
Andrew Lewis
Steve Miller
Nigel Quinlan
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Angry Youth Comix #3
Fantagraphics
By Johnny Ryan

I really can't believe that Fantagraphics would publish something like this. It isn't post-modern, it's utter crap and should have been called Petulant Brat Comix. I do not believe that the author possesses the subtlety or the skill to pass this off as irony or as a lambasting of childish humour; instead it comes across as just a collection of sick kid jokes - not the kind of thing you'd imagine diehard FBI readers to be interested in. What it does is send out the wrong signals about Fantagraphics and US independents in general.

I'm also amazed that there are many, many talented creators out there who can't get published, yet Eric Reynolds - the book's editor - sees fit to waste time, ink and paper on something as deeply offensive as this. He also must believe that Johnny Ryan is some kind of punk post-modern Charles Schulz, because I really can't understand how anyone could even raise so much as a chuckle at the likes of Loady McGee, The Deaf Chef or the decidedly sexist Blecky Yuckerella.

The last thing I want to come across as is someone who finds pushing the envelope wrong, but if Fantagraphics think this guy is groundbreaking they are *so* wrong. Ryan, however, is pushing the envelope - he's pushing it up his arse, so the next guy to come along finds it's all covered in shit.
The Verdict: I just find it remarkable that the publisher of some of the world's greatest cartoonists should lower itself to publish dross like this. Eros is one thing and another imprint, but this soils the publisher's good name and it's *three* issues old! (DRB)

Black Hole #9
Fantagraphics
By Charles Burns

The David Lynch/Cronenberg of the comics world continues his haunting and deeply disturbing tale of modern horror. Fantagraphics put together some wonderfully designed packages and this is no exception, despite it being just a comic. All of Black Hole is like individual pieces of a tapestry, and like brilliant tapestries it takes the creator a long time to produce.

#9 is about Chris's recurring nightmare and her relationship with Keith, leading up to his disappearance. It still has all of Burns' trademarks of unease and peculiarity and of course his clean and heavily stylised artwork makes you sometimes wonder why he's never worked in mainstream comics - but of course if you stick with Black Hole you maybe realise why he's never entered the safe world of the Quesadas and Levitzs. I'd also like to think that the limited number of back issues available of this wouldn't cost those interested in this series an arm and a leg to catch up with the *Twin Peaks* of comics.
The Verdict: Sometimes heavy going, but you know, it might just make sense at the end of the trip. (DRB)

Bunty Holiday Special 2002
DC Thomson
By Various Creators

The last of the traditional British weekly comics for girls may have bitten the dust almost a year ago, but so far the Christmas annuals and the summer Holiday Special are still appearing. Which is good news for some of us!

The advantage of the holiday special was always that each story was complete; as such, they provided a useful sampler for the style of the comic as a whole. That's something of a disadvantage now, though. Bunty stories were typically serials, running usually for about 8 weeks and allowing themes and stories to develop; here, each example is crammed into just a few pages, which is fine for a sampler but makes for a much lighter, less intense read than the weekly comic could often be.

Still, beggars can't be choosers, and although this year's special amounts to a time capsule, a glimpse of what once was, it's still nice to see another *Four Marys* story by Barrie Mitchell (who formerly divided his time between this and the classic football series *Roy of the Rovers*!) and to revisit what were once two of the most realist soap operas in comics, *Penny's Place* and *The Comp*. And with the rest of it rounded out by a humourous photo-strip, a horror photo-strip, a ballet story, a couple of short humour stories, features on summer fashion and the inevitable pinup photos (Britney Spears, S Club 7, David Beckham and cute animals), it's at least a comprehensive time capsule!

It will remain on sale in Britain throughout the summer months – so look it out if you're curious about a once thriving but now vanished genre of comics.
The Verdict: A curate's egg, but that's better than no egg at all! (MK)

Captain America:
Dead Men Running #3
Marvel
By Darko Macan and Danijel Zezelj

Captain America inspires the errant soldiers to do the right thing, although that doesn't guarantee a happy ending for everybody, leaving the reader with the impression that the ultimate moral of this series has been that the strayed may find redemption but at a great and often sacrificial cost.

This has been an intriguing and satisfying read. The self-righteous patriotism of Cap has somehow being turned around in Macan's hands so that all the jingoism and bullying of which the character can be accused somehow becomes inspiring. We see how this attitude can work on someone with Cap's training but without his abilities, and how even those who despise his attitude can find something beneficial in his example.

However, I'm left without the slightest desire to follow this title into next month's relaunch. As a single tale this has worked well, but as an ongoing concept - and in the hands of a lesser writer than Macan - it will

tire. As I've said before, Captain America and Marvel's other heroes do not live in our world. We can stand to be reminded once in a while that they are grounded in the world we know, but to strand them in it is to lose some of the magic that makes them work as heroes.
The Verdict: A good concept that has been well realised by the writer and artist, who have produced a decidedly different book, both in story and art. (AC)

Commando #3515
DC Thomson
By Denis McLoughlin

Top-Secret U-Boat is a reprint originally published in 1987; moreover, it's a rather static, disjointed story with no clear sense of development, themes introduced then abandoned and a rather flat ending. It reads like a try-out for Commando, going through the formulaic motions without ever getting the pacing of them right.

Still, that's down to the anonymous scripter, and the reason why you should search this out is Denis McLoughlin's absolutely marvellous art. One of the veterans of British comics, never a master of facial expressiveness but superb at evoking atmosphere and heavily shaded, incredibly solid realism, here he is in one of his many elements, dealing with a naval story. There are few artists who can convey the waters of the sea the way McLoughlin does, skilfully overlapping short lines of various thickness to convey a sense of the waves' motion which is worth experiencing regardless of what the rest of the comic is like! He draws splendidly accurate ships and planes too... in another time and place he might have been one of the great EC war artists, fully capable of meeting Harvey Kurtzman's exacting standards.

As it is, he remains one of the little-known treasures of British comics. So buy this comic; McLoughlin deserves to be much better known, and once you've seen his artwork you'll be able to identify other examples of it in a moment. Which is useful since, like most artists working for Thomson, he doesn't sign his work or get a print credit...
The Verdict: A weak story, but for once I'll recommend a comic for the art alone. (MK)

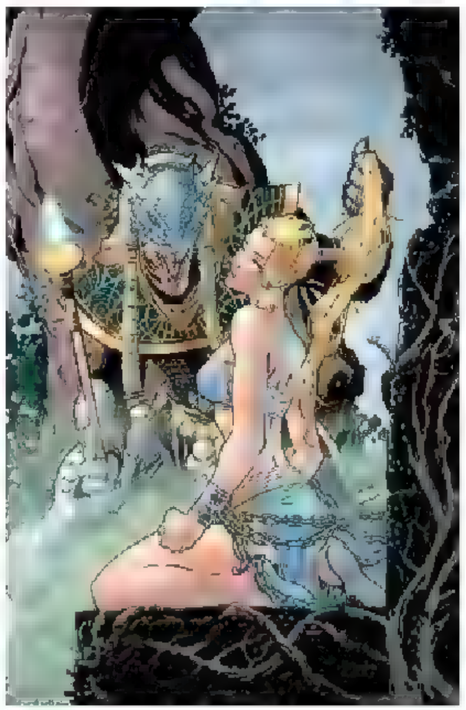
Double Shot #1
Marvel Knights
By Various Creators

Hugely delayed from initial solicitation and sporting another static, over-rendered and terminally dull Glenn Fabry cover, this doesn't scream out for purchase.

Garth Ennis writes another violent, pointless and ultimately forgettable Punisher vignette, told through the point-of-view of a mobster's mouth, as he is sadistically tortured into revealing information. It must have sounded like a fine idea to someone, but it makes for an uninteresting read, not even livened by Quesada's art, here intricately inked out of all recognition by Danny Miki. Would the real Garth Ennis please stand up?

If this is worth your money it is for Rob Haynes' contribution, coloured in beautiful, bright flat tones by David Self. Haynes' art, most recently seen in Daredevil: Ninja, is simplistic to the point of absolute clarity. There is no room for confusion in his panels, and his pace and timing work superbly. There is a passage of art in this story where it appears Daredevil is fatally injured. Normally, the reader would balk at the idea, but Haynes structures his work so that the incident is given total believability, convincing us that the unthinkable has happened, until Haynes reveals the truth in a glorious full-page image. Give this man his own series.
The Verdict: As ever with anthologies, you take the good with the bad. One story is negligible, the other unmissable. Maybe Marvel should publish this as 11-page half-comics, then we could vote for quality with our wallets. (AC)

EverQuest: The Ruins of Kunark
WildStorm
By Brad McQuaid, Jim Lee and Dan Norton



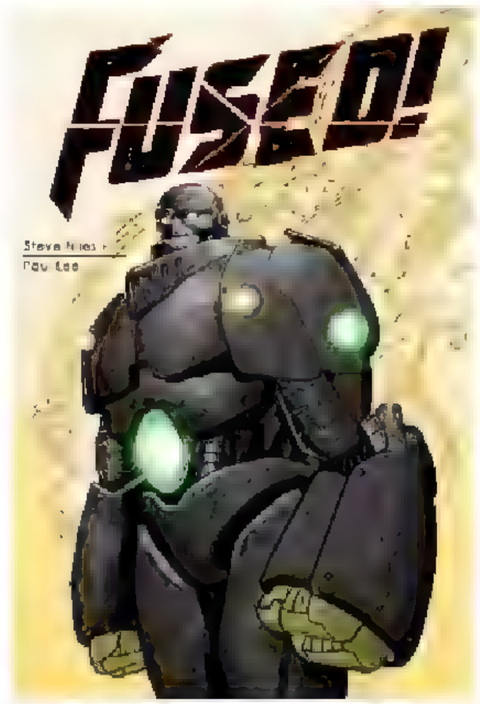
I have seen the light. I have been given the knowledge. I have gone further than was expected of me and I have drawn the conclusion! And that conclusion is?

Jim Lee is a hack. A one-trick pony. A very mediocre artist when he hasn't got a solid inker working with him. Jim Lee does not deserve your adulation. He does not deserve to set fanboys' pulses racing - he deserves to draw a shite, second-rate book. Oh, that's exactly what he's doing...

This is poo. But this is more than poo, this is the thing that gives the game away about Jim Lee. As stated above, he isn't very good and I can back that fact up with concrete evidence. There are at least 8 panels in the opening 16 pages that mirror pages and panels that have appeared in just about every Jim Lee comic since X-Men #1 – 11 years ago! Then you realise that it's only Jim Lee layouts and you start to feel as though the bottom of your world hasn't quite dissolved. But I then picked up a copy of that God-awful Stan Lee and Jim Lee Wonder Woman tripe and guess what? Even with a good inker and drawing it all himself, Jim Lee uses the same stock akimbo poses, profile face shots, faces in shadow, speed lines and overly dramatic poses. The Wonder Woman book looked similar to the EverQuest book and these look similar to Wildcats and X-Men and... oh, you get the idea.
The Verdict: Burn him, he's a witch. I feel really sorry for Rob Liefeld. I think Jim Lee is God and I don't care what you say. Choose one of these statements, delete the other two. (DRB)

Fused #1
Image Comics
By Steve Niles & Paul Lee

This definitely isn't an Iron Man rip-off; it actually feels more like the *X-Files* than anything else. Conspiracies, robotics, mysterious government agents and individual agendas make this an intriguing and thought-provoking debut issue and something completely different from



the in-your-face front cover that appears to be championing the book as something it clearly isn't.
I'm not a big fan of Niles - I think he's a poor scripter and re-hasher of old ideas - but Paul Lee is an artist who's been worth following since his Spider-Man mini a few years ago.
The Verdict: Better than you would care to believe. (DRB)

Giant Clam #2
By Ralph Kidson, Mooncat, Craig Burston and Toby Parsons
(£1 from Ralph Kidson, 3 Langridges Close, Newick, East Sussex BN8 4LZ, UK)

The 10th Anniversary of Ralphie Comics ("The World's Greatest Comics Publisher", it says 'ere) might have been taken by a more commercially-minded outfit as an opportunity to bring back the company's first big hit, Captain Dolphin. But at Ralphie they don't do things like that - when a hero's gone he's gone, never to return from suspended animation or a cocoon on

Click on Globe returns to contents

YOU KNOW IT ALWAYS
MAKES ME LAUGH WHEN YOU
HAVE THESE GHOST FICHS AND HORROR FILMS
WHERE LIKE THERES THIS FAMILY
LIVING OUT IN THE STICKS, LIKE MAINE
OR SOMEWHERE Y' KNOW?
OH YEH..
LIKE IN A HOUSE WITH ALL SLATS
AND THEY MOVE IN AND IT'S GREAT
BUT OF COURSE A GHOST PITCHES UP
—YEH

the ocean floor or a period of interstellar godhood or whatever. So instead we just get a two page letter from Mooncat and a couple of new encounters with *Envelope and Stick*...

You won't hear any complaints from me. Ralph seems to have abandoned the tendency towards plot development which was rearing its head in the latter issues of E and S's own title, replacing them with little sequences in which the two converse and deconstruct aspects of modern pop culture – here they do horror films, appear as aged, senile robots (who really fancy some kippers) in a crap SF film, and engage in appalling, mindless violence of a kind which suggests that they could well be coming to a Marvel MAX comic near you soon, were they inclined to stop being sarcastic (and to sell out). As usual, Ralph nails the repetitive idiocies of much genre entertainment with deadly accuracy, and - I'm being serious here - shows a way with realistic, mundane dialogue which makes Bendis's scripts look utterly contrived and artificial. And then there's his wonderful minimal art...

After 10 years at this game, with just a few breaks courtesy of Dave Sim and the Australian DV8 series, it's high time that Ralphie's genius was recognised. And I do mean genius - I know of no-one else working in comics who can communicate so much, so clearly, with apparently so little. Buy this man's comic, and get the second decade of the Ralphie Empire off to a cracking start!

The Verdict: If you've never seen any of Ralph Kidson's work, you've missed some of the funniest comics in the world. So rectify that situation now! (MK)

Go Girl #5
Image
By Trina Robbins and Anne Timmons

Catching up on this one rather late - but distribution of the title in Britain could be better, it seems. Why it should be hard to locate here I don't know, unless it's that this series is so far from fitting the Image, uh, image that retailers don't know what to make of it.

It would be a shame if that was the case, because there's a great deal to enjoy in Trina's deliberate attempt to establish a modern counterpart to the kind of girls' comics which flourished in the 1960s. The difference is that those only occasionally touched on superheroics whereas this one has a superheroine as the lead character; but in many ways that looks as though it's mainly a concession to the current state of the US market, since underlying it is the familiar paraphernalia of cut-out paper dolls, and stories with teen characters and school settings.

Does it work? On reading the first couple of issues I was happy that it did; while there was perhaps a slightly preachy edge to the narratives, there was also much lightness, a sense of fun, and good solid artwork by Anne Timmons. I have to say that this issue shows some signs of stress, though. The art looks rushed, especially in the later pages, and the story seems to contain one villainess too many, as if ideas and concepts are being crammed in. I hope that doesn't mean that cancellation looms; by today's standards this is a unique, charming comic, and one thing we don't need is less of something unique and charming!

The Verdict: A below par issue of a delightful series that, nevertheless, is generally well worth investigating. (MK)

Green Lantern #149
DC
By Judd Winnick & Dale Eaglesham

This consistently entertaining run on DC's ring-wielding hero builds towards the landmark issue 150 with a character-driven tête à tête between Superman and the title's eponymous hero.

Kyle "Green Lantern" Rayner has been playing God in recent issues as he pushes his will-power fuelled abilities to the limit, exploring the boundaries of the Green Lantern concept in a way no writer before Judd Winnick has dared. As a panicked Justice League scramble against an alien invasion force, Kyle disperses it with barely a blink. As far as Superman is concerned, he's gone too far - he's not so much helping humanity as "keeping" them, evidenced in the number of websites being set up to worship him. This line between godhood and heroism is one superheroes need to be careful to stay on the right side of, or so Superman believes. And Kyle agrees.

The concepts being explored here aren't especially new or unique, but rarely have they been dealt with quite so sensitively. This isn't so much a superhero book as a book about the nature of superheroism in a superheroic world, told through the eyes of a young man who is tentatively finding his way in it, unafraid to seek advice and help from people more experienced than him. If you like superhero soap, it doesn't get any better than this.

The Verdict: DC once again hit the mark with the best traditional superhero soap on the current market. (JC)

Halo & Sprocket #1
Slave Labor
By Kerry Callen

This is subtitled on the first page "The adventures of an angel and a robot, who live with a girl!" There's no back-story, you can take it or leave it, and that is in itself indicative of the charm on display here.

I rarely find supposedly funny comics actually funny. During this, I found something mildly amusing on almost every page and laughed out loud three times. That is unheard of.

Most funny comics spend so much time on setting up gags and situations that they rarely manage to say anything of any import. This comic cleverly answers the "Is the glass half-empty or half-full?" question and points out that dinosaur reconstruction often doesn't take into account the cartilage on a skeleton. I didn't know that.

Add to this that Callen's art is beautifully simple, like a more rounded, fuller-brushed version of Andi Watson, and that her cast come alive before even the first eight-page story is over - and you have a winner.

The Verdict: Kerry Callen is funny, clever and draws sexy women. I think I'm in love. (AC)

Hawkman #2
DC
By Geoff Johns, James Robinson, Rags Morales and Michael Bair

Does the new Hawkman have any more chance of succeeding than its predecessors? Well, it's got a good calibre of creator... James Robinson's Starman was one of the best superhero books of recent years, Geoff Johns is breathing new life into The Flash and the artwork is certainly delicious. How come it all seems so flat then? How come, halfway through the second issue, I was counting the remaining pages, hoping something interesting might happen - something *different*!? Because - and I'm sorry to say this, I wanted it to be different - the new Hawkman is more of the same old might-reach-#30 DC that we've all seen a hundred times before, with *nothing* new to offer. A pair of semi-

interesting leads, given virtually no introduction for new readers; a hint of will-they-won't-they-who-cares-really? romance; a supporting cast that could have stepped right out of Hourman or Stars & Stripes or Booster Gold or any of a hundred other lukewarm DC projects over the years, and a bunch of central-casting villains that appear to have no real motivation other than being bad.

You may well disagree with that assessment. But if you do, chances are you've been reading DC comics a long time. Chances are you're already familiar with these characters - their histories, backgrounds and personalities - from JSA or previous Hawkbooks. If so, stop for a second before dismissing this review, and ask yourself... what if this was the first comic book you'd ever read? Is there really enough here to make you come back for more?
The Verdict: By taking its audience for granted, DC ensures books like Hawkman will never reach a wider market. (RH)

Incredible Hulk #38
Marvel
By Bruce Jones and John Romita JR

I admit it, I bought this solely for the superb cover. Great picture, excellent design, and the Hulk now has a buzzcut! Great stuff. As far as the insides go, it seems that I have dropped in mid-story, so I have little idea of what is actually going on. Given the black ops/conspiracy nature of the shenanigans on offer here, I suspect that regular readers are only slightly less confused. Moreover, the enigmatic nature of the proceedings does seem to be wholly deliberate, so hats off to writer Bruce Jones. It should also be noted that despite the road movie

Pounded #1
Oni Press
By Brian Wood and Steve Rolston

From the creator of Channel Zero and Couscous Express and the artist of Queen And Country's first story arc comes this off-beat story of punk rock and young love in Vancouver. Heavy Parker, lead singer in punk band 'Heavy Parker and the Park Side Rockers' and trust fund party boy is living his own perfect life of bad music and wild nights and the sort of obnoxious behaviour that was so in vogue when the Sex Pistols were living it up. The objective reader might take Heavy's utterances about 'hardcore, in-your-face, throw-down, kick-ass street-ass punk rock!' with a wee pinch of salt, but the guy possesses a certain amount of rude charm, which possibly accounts for his relationship with sweet high-school cheerleader Missy Cheung. Missy is about to head off for college and Heavy has deep reservations, which of course he completely fails to communicate to Missy, about being involved in a long-distance relationship. Enter brash, loud, confident, impressively tattooed and sexually voracious female punk rocker Ali Cat, all set to throw a spanner in Heavy's works. Is his carefully constructed little world about to come crashing down around his ears?

An interesting and enjoyable mix of music, attitude and romantic entanglements, Pounded is a slight but amusing piece of entertainment. Wood is a writer of street-level urban youth culture (who reminds me, for some reason, of Paul Pope), which is a natural subject for comics, and Steve Rolston's clear, sharp art keeps the story moving along lightly.
The Verdict: A likeable, amiable little title, sexy and funny. (NQ)

Heavy Parker is the Punk Rock King of Vancouver, living the lifestyle of music, booze and meaningless sex. He also has a penthouse apartment, a cheerleader girlfriend and lives off a trust fund. Yes, he's achieving the punk aesthetic as only the non-British could do it: ass backwards and 25 years too late.

Wood injects enough humour and knowing winks in his script that Heavy is somewhat redeemed from being entirely unlikeable or laughable, although his actions throughout this first issue push at that more than once. As ever, the dialogue is natural without lapsing into the self-conscious stuttering and repetition now overused by Bendis, and the characters are introduced and established effectively before heading off into the story proper. This is, however, Wood-Lite. From the creator of the format bending Channel Zero and the more standard Couscous Express, this is even more of a slide into mainstream fare, lacking anything that would make it stand out from other similar offerings.

Rolston, fresh from Queen & Country, finds himself better employed here, his rich talent for statement and emotion put to more apt use than they were in the more down to earth adventures of Tara Chace. A lot of the comedy finds itself played up to in his almost caricatured figures, and - without missing a beat - the same talent lends pathos to the gentler moments equally well. Maybe it was a mistake to give him the cover gig, though; his is quiet, expressive art, not dynamic and eye-catching enough to attract customers on the shelf, particularly on such a blandly designed cover as Pounded is saddled with.
The Verdict: Not as ambitious as Wood's previous comics, but a funny and interesting story nevertheless, with perfectly appropriate art. (AC)

The first issue of Pounded is a love story. Well, it's also a comedy and there's the punk rock soundtrack, but deep down, it's a love story.

There's this guy, Heavy Parker. He's the leader of a punk rock band, 'Heavy Parker and the Park Side Loungers'. He's got a thing going with an under-age student, Missy, as well as having history with the lead singer of a Seattle Riot Grrl band, Ali MacClaw.

This first issue sets things up nicely for the two to follow. Although Heavy likes to think of himself as the king of the world and some of his actions make him an unsympathetic character, you can't help warming to the guy. Added to this, although he thinks he's manipulating the women in his life, it's made very clear that he is entirely helpless when it comes to both of them, that the situation is going to get out of control very quickly, and there's nothing he can do about it.

This is some of Brian Wood's best writing to date. There's nothing remotely showy about it, he's just telling a story, and he's telling it with fully developed characters, wonderful dialogue and perfectly natural situations.

He's aided in this by Steve Rolston whose wonderful art, although superficially cartoony, is actually very well suited to the story. It calls for the whole gamut of facial expressions, and Rolston's up to the task.

It's a great first issue. Although you've only just met these characters, you actually want to know what's going to happen to them and if the craftsmanship stays up to these standards, it's going to be a pleasure finding out.
The Verdict: Punk rock, comic books, comedy. What's not to like? (SM)

style of the plot, this is not as similar to the Bill Bixby TV series as some commentators have maintained. Not that said series was unworthy of pastiche, of course.

It is a solidly written issue, with good pacing, good dialogue and a nice sense of ironic humour. The corpse-people that litter the issue are a great, if entirely bizarre, idea. The young Romita is a great artist, but I must confess to never seeing what all the fuss is about concerning his current Amazing Spider-Man work. On this title, however, he produces truly superb art. Both titles have rather understated visuals, with lots of normal people going about normal business in normal locations, but here JRJR seems to be doing much better work. His Banner has a suitably weedy and yet creepy look, while his rendition of the Hulk is great fun, full of the dynamic energy that is so often missing from other artists' versions.

My interest in the Hulk himself is not enough to make me continue getting this title, but that is no fault of this excellent creative team; rather, my feeling is that all the Hulk stories have already been told. That said, both the writing and the art are enough reason to buy this comic. And that cover is gorgeous!

The Verdict: Ironically for a character like the Hulk, this is a solid, understated comic. If you like good comics, you will love this! (KG)

I Hate Cartoons #1

Attaboy

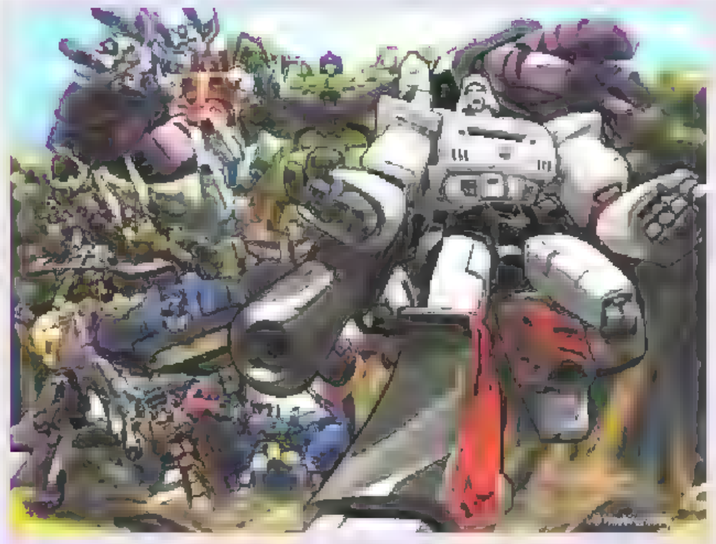
By Various Creators

Designed as a showcase for allegedly underground comic and toy artists this manages to delight and infuriate in equal measure. Where some strips are clever, others are pointless. Where some one-page gags and mock adverts are amusing, the repetition of such dulls the effect.

Some of the better strips are offered by Eric Talbot, A.C. Farley and Mark Martin, all alumni of the old Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles comic, about as far from the underground of comic publishing as it was possible to be at the time. *The Robot Will Not Be Stopped* by Ben Burke is well written and very nicely drawn but I can't tell what it's about. On the other hand, Chris Hicks' *The Man With The Golden Wings* is equally well produced but could be about almost whatever the reader would like.

The rest of the comic strips - despite some wry humour and fine cartooning - are ultimately a victim of their own sameness, rendering what could have been an interesting ensemble of talent into what reads like a comic more full of adverts than is normal.

The Verdict: No one is more tired



Transformers: Generation 1 #1

Dreamwave Productions

By Chris Sarracini, Pat Lee, Rob Armstrong and Edwin Garcia

First of all, let's have the obligatory history lesson. Disregarding the various Japanese entries into the Transformers canon, there are three versions of the "classic" Transformers: the US comic, the UK comic, and the TV cartoon. The US comic looked awful most of the time, and even when the superb UK comic art team took over, shoddy colouring hindered their work. Worse, until the writer of the UK comics, Simon Furman, took over, the plots rarely rose above "glorified toy advert" status. The cartoon had a few good episodes, but it too suffered from the necessity to keep the copyright owners happy, by abandoning plot in favour of showcasing the latest toys. In the UK the creative team let loose and produced a truly wonderful product of which, you will not be surprised to learn, this reviewer was a huge fan.

So, you can imagine my trepidation when I saw the early designs for this new series and noticed that, visually at least, it seemed to be based on the TV cartoon. Given that this would be a US-produced comic, I thought that it would also be likely that the plot would be cartoon-influenced, and that could be a bad thing.

I would love to say that I was wrong, but to tell the truth, I cannot be sure at this point. The setting is ambiguously described, making it equally possible that this is a sequel to the original series (particularly the TV cartoon) or a new version. It does seem a little more likely that this is a new attempt at the tale, in the "Ultimate" style of Marvel. All the familiar elements of the original setting are here, like the Ark, the Witwicky family (puttup!), and so on, but they have been rearranged into a refreshing new order. The plotting is good, with the major players being adequately set up, parallel plotlines being put effectively into motion, and the important characters being introduced. Not much goes on, it must be said, but the setting up is well done, establishing a solid basis for events to occur. Some of the characters seem a little clichéd, but given that this first issue is more devoted to setting up rather than character development, that's to be expected. Furthermore, writer Chris Sarracini shows his talent by creating interest in the painfully tiresome "conspiratorial military commander" through some effective dialogue. One weakness of the writing is that too much knowledge of the setting is assumed. Things are left unexplained that a veteran Transformers fan will recognise and understand, but that a new reader will find confusing. It may be the case that the original Transformers fans will be the only audience for this comic, but that seems little reason to make it impenetrable to the newcomer.

The art is truly spectacular. Aside from the annoyingly murky shading technique Dreamwave like to use, this looks very good indeed. The style does owe much to the TV series, but the art team has substantially improved on the original designs. While there is a slightly soulless quality to the art that makes it slightly inferior to the visuals produced by the likes of Geoff Senior or Andy Wildman, technically speaking these are some of the best Transformers I have ever seen. These robots look like machines, with actual joints and moving parts, which distinguishes them from previous visualisations, which tended to present them as merely oddly shaped humanoids. It is a refreshing and interesting technique, but the amount of intricate detail leads to fears about how well the art team will be able to keep to a regular schedule. That said, the visuals here are astonishingly good, and are a considerable achievement.

The Verdict: Essential for Transformers fans, and obviously aimed at them (us!), but it is uncertain how much a newcomer will get from this. Still, it is still worth buying this for the visuals alone. (KG)

of saying this than I am, but anthologies seem to rely on quality strips propping up tired, old talent or unready new talent. A good editor should prune this into something worth reading. (AC)

Jack Staff #8
Dancing Elephant Press
By Paul Grist

Another action packed adventure with Britain's Greatest Hero! A host of bizarre, enigmatic or just plain weird characters jostle for your attention! A good half dozen little sub-plots scuttle about this way and that! Thanks to Paul Grist's accomplished skill, however, the pages never seem crowded and the sub-plots all dovetail perfectly.

In this extra sized issue, our titular hero, the unpleasant and unfriendly Detective Inspector Maveryk and those investigators of the weird and uncanny known only as Q are pursuing a serial killer whose impossible murders mirror those in a book by the suggestively named author Iain M Angel. Who or what is responsible for the murders? Why is Jack Staff acting so funny? Will Maveryk succeed in stitching someone, anyone, but preferably Jack Staff, up? Isn't Helen Morgan of Q supposed to be dead? Why is The Druid insisting on wandering into the wrong story? Will Iain M Angel ever go back to writing comics?

There is no justification for not reading Jack Staff. I don't care if you hate super heroes or black and white art or whatever, you should be reading it. It's wonderful, and Paul Grist is a treasure. Jack Staff is pure fun.

The Verdict: Action, adventure, mystery, magic and murder, all in one issue. Everyone should read Jack Staff. (NQ)

Luba #6
Fantagraphics
By Gilbert Hernandez

I tend to shy away from reviewing Beto Hernandez's comics, because it's very hard for me to be objective about them. Frankly, I consider him to be probably the finest master of storytelling currently working in American comics, and every new issue from him I welcome the way a hungry man welcomes the sight of a sumptuous banquet...

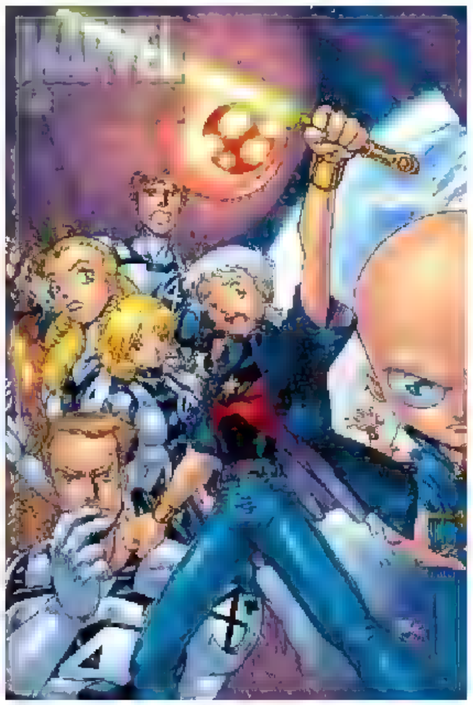
So about the closest I can muster to any criticism of this issue is that the title is something of a misnomer - beyond a peripheral appearance in the opening four page story, Luba herself is absent from its pages. It begins to look as though Beto is using familiar names from Love and Rockets as titles, while actually concentrating on his new but less famous favourites, the resplendent and sexually voracious sisters Fritzi and Petra.

But that's such an insignificant point, when the joy of a Beto comic is never so much his choice of cast members as it is his seemingly effortless pacing of the stories and the extraordinary naturalistic dialogue. The latter does require work of the reader; you have to accept that many of his characters are related, and that they talk to each other as people who've known each other for years *really* do, in a kind of shared vocabulary not loaded with exposition and explanation for the benefit of the reader. If you can take that as a starting point, then his characterisations will hit you with a blast of realism that could never be achieved by any amount of the agonised soliloquising which often passes for characterisation in comics.

The plot? Like many of Beto's stories nowadays it deals with sexual politics; Fritzi finds a new boyfriend them sets him up with Petra, who coldly (and without his knowledge) uses the guy to get a petty revenge on her former husband. It really doesn't matter what happens, though. Beto could apply his narrative technique to just about any scenario and come up with something fascinating and absorbing. If you haven't yet found this out, then go back to his New Love miniseries - or, for a slightly more mainstream introduction to his work, the Dark Horse Girl Crazy trade paperback - and see if you don't become enthralled.

The Verdict: If this creator used a menu as his plot the result would be worth buying! (MK)

Marvel Mangaverse #1
Marvel
By Ben Dunn and Kevin Gunstone



The successful Mangaverse event of a few months back spins out into an ongoing series, which can only be a good thing, as the main bookend titles in that recent event were hampered by trying to explore too many good ideas in too small a space. Here, the pace is a little more relaxed, although it helps immeasurably that there is a smaller cast, and that most of the setting up was done in the miniseries. The splendid Megascale Metatalent Response Team Fantastic Four returns, although the writing hints that the Evangelion style of the one-shot is going to be dropped in favour of a more traditional view of the team. I hope to be proved wrong, as the new version of the team was highly original and great fun. Some of the team's character has been lost, but that can be put down to the different styles of this writing partnership and Adam Warren, writer of the FF one-shot.

New characters include a fabulous version of Uatu the Watcher, who may be the most terrifyingly amusing giant space baby since the demonic sun from Teletubbies, and a very imaginative version of Galactus, here reborn as some kind of giant floating eye. The focus of the issue is on the new Captain Marvel, a somewhat obnoxious teenage boy.

Unfortunately, as well as being the central focus of the issue, this character is also the weakest aspect of the comic. He is a truly unpleasant brat and is wholly un-likeable as a central character. This is his debut appearance so, with some luck, there will be some development of the character. Heroic characters of this sort tend to become better people after overcoming adversity, so an improvement is likely.

There is a fair amount of exposition in the writing, but it is handled well, and the scripting as a whole is very effective, with some very funny moments. Ben Dunn's art complements the writing well, and the artist inserts plenty of visual humour of his own. The art is very attractive indeed, which I suppose is not surprising considering Dunn's wonderful art in the earlier Mangaverse event. His strength here is in giving depth to the characterisation through excellent drawing of expressions and body language. Dunn also shows skill at action shots and epic panoramas, and his panel layouts are top-notch. Guru eFX again provide gorgeous colouring which adds to the energetic feel of the art.

Marvel were wise to commission this as an ongoing series, as the format looks set to finally do justice to the considerable talents of Messrs. Dunn and Gunstone.

The Verdict: A good first issue which rectifies the problems of the original miniseries, and which is a very worthy purchase on its own merits too. (KG)

Morlocks #1
Marvel
By Geoff Johns & Shawn Martinbrough

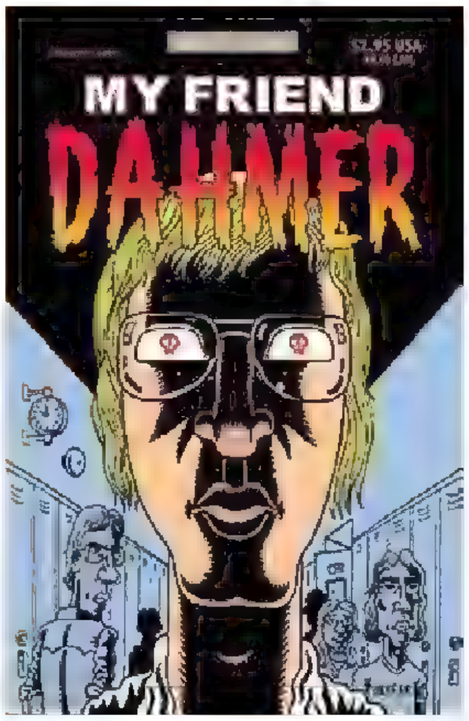
Unlike the interesting new X-Factor, this is drivel - the same old same old persecuted mutants whining about their lot. Blah blah blah. Yawn.

The Verdict: Don't bother. (JC)

My Friend Dahmer
Derfcity Comics
By John Backderf

Creator John Backderf went to school with, and was a friend of, cannibalistic murderer Jeffrey Dahmer; this is his story.

It's not sensationalist or opportunistic, nor is it too graphic or



overly morbid. It has just enough of those qualities to make it work, while shunning the temptation to dramatise the story or dwell on the more tabloid aspects that would make this comic less than it is. Dahmer is presented as an oddball, an outsider who, shunned by his peers and teachers, retreats inside himself. He drinks beer before going into school and, when in school, makes an exhibition of himself by mimicking his mother's interior decorator, who had cerebral palsy. This behaviour actually gained him a fan club, of which Backderf was the president. It's the story about that friend you had that was always strange who turned out to be insane and how that would change your feelings towards them after the fact.

Presented in two parts with an epilogue, Backderf paints Dahmer as tragic and disturbed, yet also with sympathy, as if in respect not only to his bizarre form of friendship but also to his humanity and circumstances. The art is black and white independent, veering towards underground almost - the contortions and anatomy of the characters put me in mind of S. Clay Wilson and Terry LaBan.

The Verdict: Avoiding sensationalism, this is a simple retelling of a teenage friendship that is given resonance by the wider facts of the case. It's disturbing, for all the right reasons, and sad, for all the wrong reasons. (AC)

Noble Causes #2
Image Comics
By Jay Faerber and Patrick Gleason

A considerable drop in quality over the previous two issues, but only from an artistic perspective. Pat Gleason might be a hot newcomer, but if this is what he's capable of doing then one wonders why Marvel and DC are keen to employ him. It might have been prudent to have had a fill in artist do the remaining two or three pages of the issue's main story rather than settle for the hurried look of what actually appears.

But, all in all, Faerber is crafting an intriguing *Dallas*-styled series that honestly deserves to be on the comic store shelves. There are enough twists and turns in the first few issues to convince me it's worth sticking with.

The Verdict: Great concept and scripts let down by rushed artwork. (DRB)

The O Men #14
By Martin Eden
(From 19a Trevelyan Road, Tooting, London, SW17 9LS)

One of the great things about this series is the way creator Martin Eden plays with all the usual superhero comic elements in new, refreshing ways. This issue sees the O Men equivalent of the traditional funeral issue and the current trend in "widescreen" comics. Wisely, Eden avoids the usual approach to both. The funeral scene is interspersed with flashbacks that reveal much about the mysterious Union Jack, including yet another affair! The inevitable, yet surprising, arrival of Anathema at the funeral of Union Jack gives the proceedings a palpable sense of true menace, even though she does little in the way of using her powers. It really is difficult to see how our heroes will be able to defeat this immortal and clearly very powerful enemy, and in contrast to team books like JLA, or even Avengers, with their all-powerful protagonists, this is a refreshing approach indeed. All that said, Eden shows off his writing skills yet again with a climax, which, while tainted by unnecessarily clumsy exposition, shows a weaker side of Anathema. She is shown to be uncertain, lonely, and emotionally feeble (when she's not being sadistic, that is), which all give her a depth of character often unseen in super-villains.

As mentioned above, this is also a "widescreen" issue, but Eden avoids making the issue gimmicky by flipping it onto its side and filling it with splash pages. Instead, he presents each page with four panels that stretch across, with similar dimensions to the widescreen. This achieves the filmic effect much better than other attempts, as the panels do look like sequential frames. The regular page layout also gives the issue an interesting and effective sense of pacing. At first glance, such a widescreen approach would not seem appropriate for a funeral issue, but somehow Eden makes it work. However, its effectiveness rests in its uniqueness, so hopefully he won't be using the format too often.

This is a strong issue in terms of art, with good storytelling and pacing and some nicely composed shots plus a great cover, just on the right side of "arty." The quirky style of Eden's art pushes itself to the forefront here, and his artistic weaknesses are nowhere to be seen. The main flaw, and it is not a big one, of this issue is the introduction of an American superteam, the USaviors. The concept of the team is not so bad, even though they seem to be some kind of Authority/Stormwatch pastiche, but there are a number of small details, which might seem clever and cute to some readers, but just seemed niggling to me. Their dialogue is one such feature, as is the team name, being partly a pun on their nation's name. This isn't a bad idea as such, but it has been used before to better effect, for instance in the UK Ultra Knights. The USaviors also have a fairly traditional set of superpowers in comparison to the O Men, but I wouldn't be surprised if this is Eden's reference to the big US super teams, with their token strong guy, token fast guy, etc.

The saving grace of the USaviors cameo is that is hints at some connection between them and the enigmatic Miss Scarlet. Moreover, this issue gives the reader a number of hints about the backstory of the O Men; notably Union Jack's past, and more evidence/misinformation for the "Miss Scarlet is an alternate universe version of Stu's sister" theory. The discovery and piecing together of such hints and red herrings is one of the joys of storytelling which is so often missing in comics, and is done so very well here.

The Verdict: Once again Martin Eden shows the world of comics, both small press and professional, how it should be done. This is a truly excellent comic. (KG)

Spider-Man's Tangled Web #12
Marvel
By Zeb Wells and Duncan Fegredo

Zeb Wells - *Wizard* video-award winner (and no, I don't have the first idea what that means either) - writes this story, featuring the troubles associated with being the Son of the Frog-Man. It's confidently done, bridging the humorous aspects of the story with the more dramatic ones very well. Wells' dialogue flows easily, catching the nuances inherent in

every character, from the youngest and hippest to the oldest and most crotchety. This is no one-hit wonder; Wells' current stint standing in for Paul Jenkins on two issues of Peter Parker: Spider-Man also bodes well for this new writer. And he *was* the *Wizard* video-award winner, if that counts for anything in your book.

Fegredo's art is as reliable as it ever was, mixing his playful expressions with realism and drawing the most involving backgrounds in the entire field. His art here is self-coloured, and he brings a pleasing roundness to his figures with careful use of low- and highlights, as well as augmenting his panels with scanned in images and excellent lighting effects.
The Verdict: A promising debut by an interesting new writer, one who - with only this to judge – seems capable of more than standard fare (and winning *Wizard* video awards). And you'll never go too far wrong with a comic drawn by Duncan Fegredo. (AC)

Strip For Me #5

(Issues 1-5 are now available at 50p each plus SAE Available from Douglas Noble, 42 Nightingale Walk, Hemel Hempstead, Herts. HP2 7QY)
Wow! Back when I first began to pick up small press books seriously, I was struck by Patrick Brown's A Virtual Circle. All pen scratchings, it was filled with what, despite the effort and direction apparent, was first draft art (probably). No blue pencil, no script, just laying down those inks in one take. This is similar in effect, and quite difficult to turn my eyes from. Noble proves he is no sham sketcher, a delectable set of cubes and curves elegantly glide across the panels, some of them most gorgeous. The story is of little happening yet I do ask, "What is going on?", and there is the point. Just like Brown's AVC, Noble has asked me to go with my gut instinct. Whereas my brain says something is badly drawn, my gut or reasoning says, "Hold on, you're missing something here". SFM is a comic that asks for you to weigh up those judgements and make connections.
The Verdict: Establishes an intimate atmosphere through the artist's dedication. Very soothing. (AL)

The Ultimates #3

Marvel
By Mark Millar & Bryan Hitch
Marvel's updating of the Avengers continues apace, proving that there's life in the old icons yet. Unlike the "real" Avengers title, weighed down by Kurt Busiek's over-reverence for tired old continuity, this series is fresh and vibrant, full of genuinely new ideas and a modern feel that borrows unashamedly from the WildStorm school of superheroes for the 21st century. Beautifully drawn by Bryan Hitch, who has long since stepped out from Alan Davis's shadow, the third issue continues to expand the not-as-familiar-as-you'd-expect cast: Hank and Janet Pym spend time in the spotlight, as do Tony Stark, Nick Fury, Bruce Banner and the newly reawakened Captain America. The book is moving slowly towards the ensemble piece we expect. Of course, its slow build up is paced more for the collected edition than for a monthly serial, but that's the nature of today's mainstream comics and it really isn't a disadvantage. This is not the Avengers you thought you knew - and thank god for that. It's not dull, it's not predictable and it's not re-treading stories you've read before. By far the best of the Ultimates line so far, this book is everything the imprint should be – fresh, original, modern and accessible to all, whether you've memorised the Official Handbook of the Marvel Universe or not. Pick it up now.
The Verdict: The perfect jumping on point to the Marvel Universe to new, old and returning readers alike. (JC)

Ultimate Spider-Man #21

Marvel
By Brian Michael Bendis and Mark Bagley
This issue is a rather clever little bit of sleight of hand on the part of Bendis. The cover would indicate that this is a full-on 22 page punch-up between Spidey and Kraven the Hunter. In fact, Kraven gets taken out with one punch, his TV hard-man act no match for superpowers. With Spidey having saved the day by defeating Doctor Octopus (whose old-school spandex threads have been the only false note in this re-envisioned Spidey-verse), Peter gets to put his side of the story to the usually hostile press. With Spider-Man now being hailed as a hero, Peter goes home - only to get a bollocking and a grounding from Aunt May. What's a misunderstood teenage superhero to do?

It's this juxtaposition of the fantastical and the real that allows Bendis and Bagley to transform old ideas into all-ages-accessible comic book gold. Ultimate Spider-Man takes us back to the early days when Peter Parker was a sympathetic every-teen rather than a supermodel-dating 20-something, but reinvents the stories with the character and depth a Buffy-literate audience require. The results are engaging and humane, especially in this issue, while little character moments - a jubilant Mary Jane, a despairing Aunt May, a depressed Sharon Carter - put real emotion and wallop behind the superheroic A-plot. Not that the more fantastic elements aren't working - the slow build-up of a superhero universe has done a lot to restore the sense of wonder to Spidey's world. Throwing Doctor Octopus - who has twigged Spidey's secret identity - into the hands of sinister SHIELD agents looks set to shake up Peter Parker's life even further.

Providing sterling support to Bendis' story are the art team of Mark Bagley and Art Thibert, whose clean line work is unfussy but effective, a statement that could also be applied to the book as a whole. Simple yet appealing, this is another issue of a book that continues to impress.
The Verdict: The perfect fodder for newcomers drawn in by the movie, this is the kind of all ages entertainment that many creators attempt but few can pull off. Magic. (MC)

X-Factor #1

Marvel
By Jeff Jensen & Arthur Ranson
The last thing we need is another bloody mutant book, but before you groan and turn away at least give the new X-Factor (no relation to the previous series of the same name) a chance. Following the adventures of two human government agents

assigned to deal with mutant affairs, the book actually manages to find a fresh take on the mutant situation. Skimming the surface of the Marvel Universe as it does - no Lycra costumes, no codenames and no twee battles between good and evil - X-Factor tells a straightforward detective story of the investigation into the murder of a young man found crucified on the Hollywood sign with the word "Mutant" razor-bladed into his chest. There's a definite feel of the *X-Files* about it, but as a first foray into comics for a new audience weaned on TV sci-fi, it's accessible, entertaining and a fine read. For those of us used to the X-Men and their world, it's a genuinely fresh take. Be prepared to be surprised.
The Verdict: An interesting aside to the X-book family - taking a look at mutants from the other side. (JC)

X-Force #126
Marvel
By Pete Milligan and Mike Allred

The fertile imaginations of Milligan and Allred continue to wreak merry havoc in this title, which is rapidly becoming one of the most compulsive soap operas I've ever seen. One of our heroes is about to get it in the neck big time, and just when we've learned to love The Orphan, U-Go-Girl and company. No fair! The threat of death hangs over the X-Force team in the most melodramatic way possible, with clues and misdirections relating to the identity of the unlucky victim flying about with gay abandon. The addition of the creepy, sexy Dead Girl to the line-up adds a further twist, as Edie (U-Go-Girl) attempts to wring some clues out of a team-mate with one foot already on the other side. The tension concerning possible fatalities mounts as the team are sent on a mission they're supposed to deliberately lose, heading into a space station full of death-row mutants masquerading as aliens (don't ask).

X-Force is pretty much a genre unto itself, an almost endless stream of invention flinging out new characters and concepts on a regular basis while chewing through a dense ongoing wealth of plotlines. Will Edie and the Orphan get it together? Is there another couple developing within the team? What is the secret of Dead Girl's origin? Will Spike and the Anarchist kill each other? Who will live? Who will die? And what the hell is Doop anyway? Questions like these keep the pages turning in a book that is exciting, touching and very, very funny.

Not to put too fine a point on it, this is a great comic. Milligan's tight, witty scripts are perfectly matched by Allred's stylised, fluid and in places strangely sensual artwork. The cover for this issue, with a naked Dead Girl semi-concealed by a tombstone, is a particularly striking image. From that cover to one of the funniest letters pages in comics (where disgruntled Liefeld-ites are wheeled out for the readership to laugh at), X-Force continues to be one of Marvel's strongest titles, and this issue leaves us in suspense once more (as well as ending on an extremely funny gag).
The Verdict: Humour, involving plotlines, great ideas, superb art; if you're not buying this already, there may be no hope for you. (MC)

New X-Men #125
Marvel Comics
By Grant Morrison & Igor Kordey

If ever a title existed by the skin of its teeth it's this one. What was the flagship of the new wave of X-Men has rapidly become a refugee boat of the aimless and disenfranchised in search of a direction.

Morrison's scripts have finally lost all semblance of coherence and pace. The X-Men are on the verge of defeat; we can tell this because they've all got a cold; their super villain opponent is a woman hiding in the naked body of a skinny bald fella; their allies are the Super Guardians, and they're particularly inspiring because they have thigh-high boots and mohican haircuts. Imagine being threatened by a nude wimp and befriended by the Village People while you've got the sniffles, and you might be able to feel the fear. Couple this with self-consciously flip dialogue and an impenetrable plotline and it's entirely unreadable.

Igor Kordey isn't helping matters by drawing the most inept and downright amateurish art since Chuck Austen turned to writing comics instead of illustrating them. Kordey can draw, because page one of this is quite good, but he plainly hasn't got the time to make a decent job of the whole issue; if he had he surely would have redesigned the camp anachronisms that are the Shi'Ar and the Super Guardians. What's the point of giving the X-Men a 21st Century polish with black leather uniforms when everybody else looks like they've escaped from a Gay Pride Mardi Gras? If you are going to have a comic appallingly drawn and with character design at least 20 years out of date, you may as well employ John Byrne. At least he can keep a monthly schedule.

There's a double-page spread with an ad page in the middle of it, and apparently the Beast is now gay. And there's a Turkey Man on the cover.
The Verdict: An absolute shambles from start to finish, although it doesn't so much start and finish as ramble incoherently from place to place. An embarrassment. (AC)

VERDICT COLLECTED EDITION

De Koene Ridder Vol. 1
Casterman
By François Craenhals

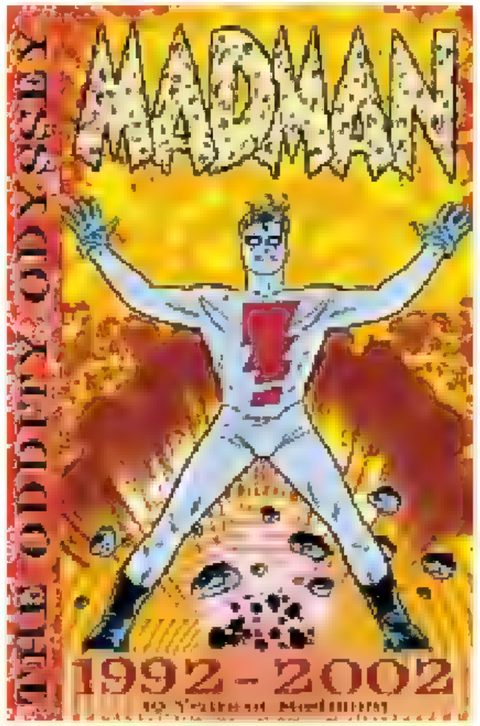
When the veteran Franco-Belgian writer/artist François Craenhals commenced his mediaeval-flavoured *Chevalier Ardent* series for Tintin Magazine in early 1966, he ended up producing one of the classic Franco-Belgian series, running to more than 20 frequently reprinted albums. The present collection bundles together the earliest three albums, in their Dutch language version, in a handsome hardback volume rounded out with some useful introductory material.

Where most of the great Franco-Belgian classics feature a fixed cast of characters who do not age or noticeably develop over time – whether in the 1930s or 1960s Tintin remains forever a youth - Craenhals' hero Roland was already changing and growing noticeably within these first three stories, from an impetuous youth to a young man learning how to lead others. This unusual realism, while a notable aspect of the series, is of minor importance, though, compared with its most absorbing qualities - a clean, old-fashioned but subtly detailed drawing style and Craenhals's marvellous ability to convey what feels like an authentic sense of the Middle Ages (even though his settings are, like those of Prince Valiant, grounded in fantasy).

Although Craenhals may have no more than a fraction of Foster's drawing skills, that's more than enough to make every page of this book a pleasure to savour - and the sense of growth and dynamism in the stories will lead you to want more and more.
The Verdict: A sumptuous but affordable introduction to a Franco-Belgian classic. (MK

Madman: The Oddity Odyssey
Oni Press
By Mike Allred

This trade paperback from Oni makes the first Madman story,



originally published in three issues in 1992 by Tundra, available again for the first time in years. With his subsequent work on Madman and, more recently, X-Force having gained him more fans, it's a good opportunity to look back at the character's early years.

Allred's art has always been an acquired taste. You either love it or you hate it, there's no in between. His writing also has a tendency to wander, as if he's got hundreds of great ideas that he just has to get out now, and if it adversely affects the narrative, well, it's still a heckuva ride. What this collection shows us is that these elements were present right from the start.

His art is much less developed than the clean line figures we know today, but, for me, it appears no less dynamic. Strange though it may seem to see his work without colour, it also doesn't detract from the story, with the copious use of grey throughout giving the art a lovely duotone aspect.

As mentioned earlier, the story does meander a bit, but when the diversions include Dr. Flem losing his head, a pack of angry clones, vicious railwaymen, and our hero being shot out of the roof of a circus tent as a Human Cannonball, well, only a churl would complain.

Allred's trademark quirkiness is present and correct as well. There's a fight scene near the beginning where Frank spends as much time berating one of the hoodlums for being a liar as he does fighting him, and an origin sequence that's as goofball as you'd expect.

Over the past ten years, Madman has been a consistent delight, and it's good to see work of this quality being brought back into print. Hopefully, with Allred's current high profile, Oni should be able to shift a few copies.

Verdict : "Fantastic, groovy, stupendous, what a madman, he's astoundingly heroic." I couldn't put it better myself. (SM)

The Roadkill of Middle Earth
iBooks

By John Carnell and Tom Sutton

Can you say "half-assed cash in"? Go on, try it. See how the words trip neatly off the tongue. Good. Now, try prefixing them with the sentence "The Roadkill Of Middle Earth is a."

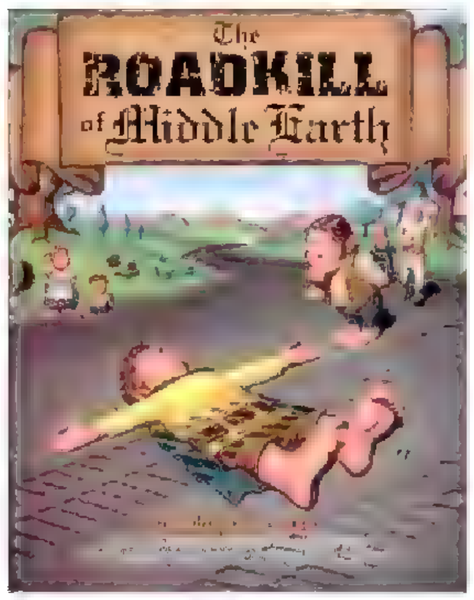
It's worth mentioning that The Roadkill Of Middle Earth isn't so much a comic as an illustrated novella, but then again it's worth mentioning that it isn't so much an illustrated novella as a string of excruciating puns tied together with a series of poor pencil and watercolour pictures. The plot, such as it is, revolves around a big lorry that roams around Middle Terra Firma running people over, but it doesn't get any more in-depth than that.

It's a shame, because some of the jokes aren't too bad; the majority are of the Douglas Adams punchline-in-a-footnote style, but the problem here is that Carnell reaches the punchline and then keeps going, ruining any sense of comic timing. With a stronger narrative to hold the whole thing together he might have pulled it off, but there's no back-story, no explanation as to why any of this is happening, leaving me with an overwhelming sense of "who cares"-ness, never a good sign in a reader.

Don't be fooled by the cover, by the way, because the interior art bears no resemblance to it. The cover is a detailed, airbrushed affair, while the interior art is made up of loose, scratchy linework, sloppily coloured with watercolour and, it appears, pencil crayon. It would have helped if Sutton had rubbed out his pencil lines, too.

There are some nice touches, like Legolando, who appears to be an Elfish Vietnam veteran, but at the end of the day this is a book of bad name puns and people getting run over, and that's only funny for so long.

The Verdict: There's nothing wrong with a bit of bandwagon-jumping, but this doesn't quite make the leap; in fact, it kind've gets crushed beneath the wheels. (CS)



Swamp Thing Volume 5: Earth To Earth
Vertigo

By Alan Moore, Rick Veitch, John Totleben and Alfredo Alcala

Comic fans divide firmly into two camps when it comes to Alan Moore. There are those who revere him as a god, the father of the modern "adult" comic, a mythic comicbook shaman who can do no wrong... and there are those who respect him as a talented genre-writer with an unfortunate tendency to occasionally disappear right up his own beard. This reviewer, feet firmly in the latter camp, generally treats every new Moore Greatest Hits release with cautious scepticism... but often ends up having to eat his own criticism.

Earth To Earth is the fifth collection of Moore's Swamp Thing, and it represents the writer somewhere near the top of his game. The central plot has Swampy getting all Garden Of Eden on Gotham City's grass when Abby is arrested for "consorting with a non-human organism" - or, let's be frank, shagging a vegetable. It's an idea so obvious most writers wouldn't even have considered it, but Moore has that ability to think outside the box, turning the suspension of disbelief back upon itself, asking questions that were seldom asked within the genre prior to his arrival. Morrison and Milligan may now do this every month, but credit where's it due - Alan Moore got there first. Also admirable is the writer's effortless genre-shifting - from super-hero to horror to human drama and beyond - though his tendency to over-egg the narrative is occasionally distracting. There's no doubt he's a master of language, but sometimes all that poetry seems a tad flowery, telling in fancy detail what the lush art has already shown perfectly well. (Both Rick Veitch and John Totleben put in excellent turns here, though the real credit must go to Alfredo Alcala's inks, flowing like swamp waters.)

Still, if Alec Holland occasionally talks like a Jim Steinman lyric, it's a minor complaint, particularly in a book that has so much else to enjoy - from Batman cracking possibly the funniest line of his career through to the final story reprinted here, *My Blue Heaven*. It's a portrait of loneliness - both social and sexual - that moves from boredom and despair to thinly-veiled masturbation metaphor. You don't have to be Alan Moore's biggest fan to respect the genius in that.

The Verdict: The love that really shouldn't speak its name - vegaphilia. Now that's got to be worth a read...(RH)

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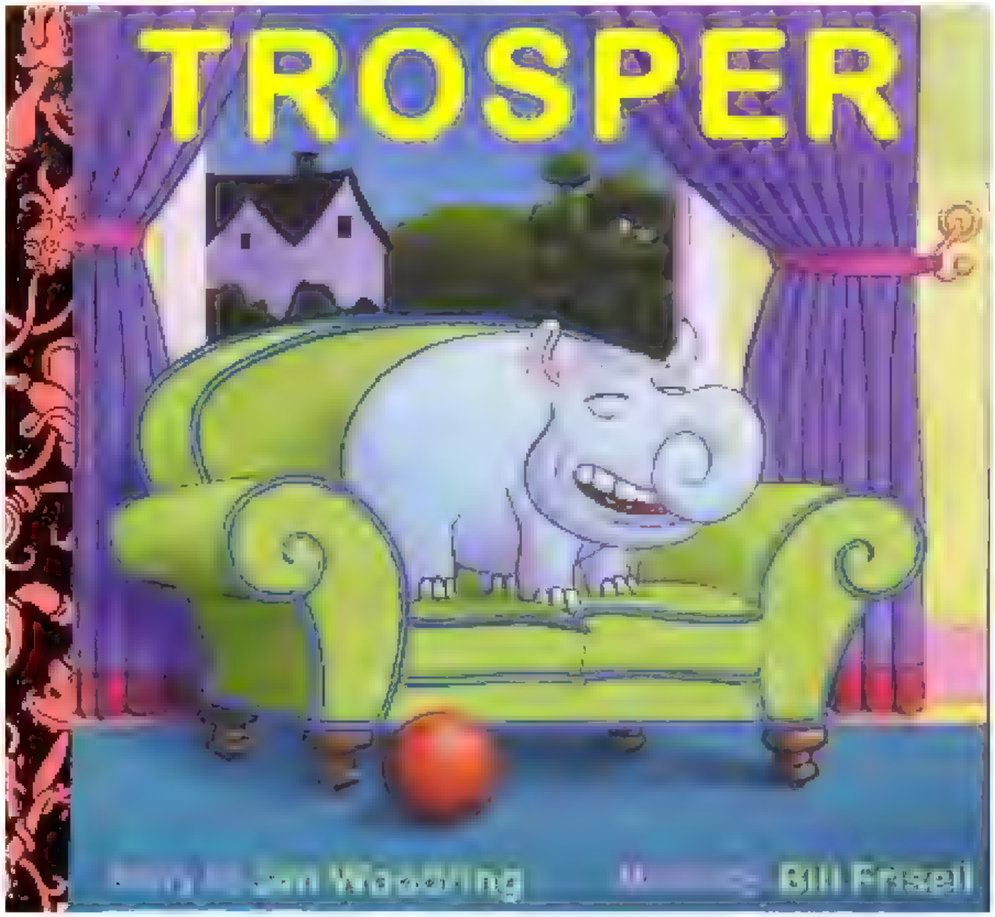


SOMETHING STRANGE

Trosper
Fantagraphics
By Jim Woodring (art & story) and Bill Frisell (music CD)

Take a look at these pictures on this page! Do they look like something from a children's book? Xemnu-like creatures; strange vaginal shaped menaces, weird looking elephant-type creatures with a penchant for brightly coloured balls - and that's just the three pictures Borderline has chosen to reproduce. You ought to see the rest of it, it will give you nightmares...

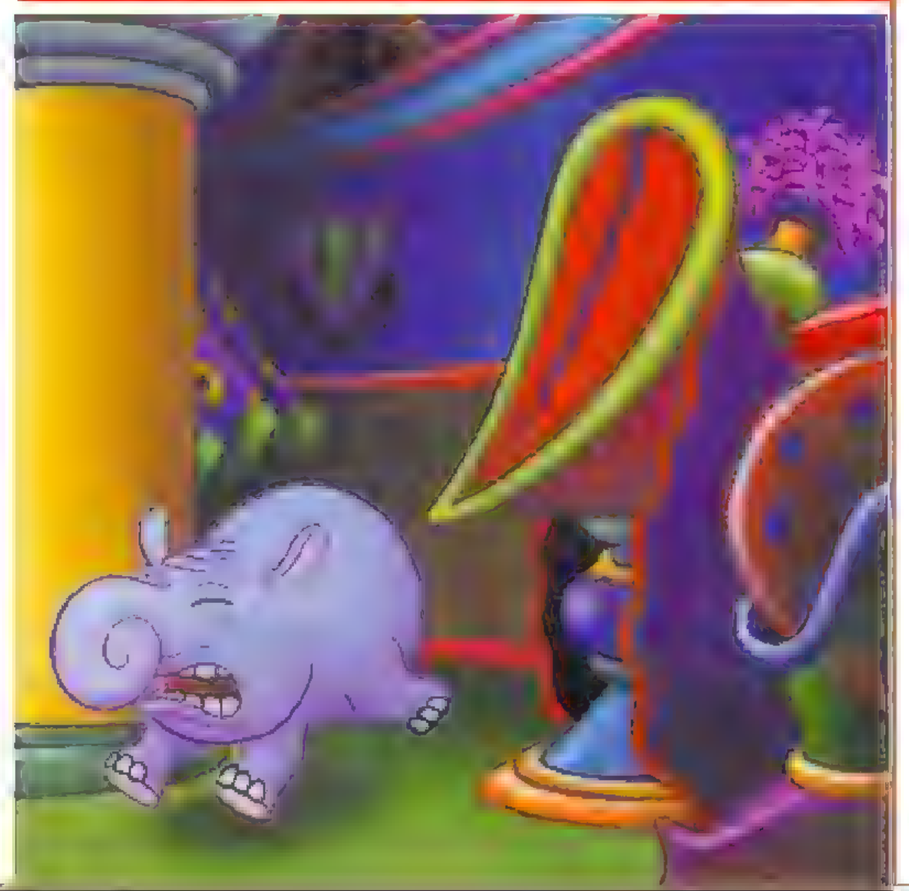
And that is the sign of its true genius. Trosper defies logic because it probably is a children's book, but it would be disturbing for most parents to give their children something as peculiar as this.

For starters your parents would need to be Bill Gates and wife because this little book (16½cm by 15cm), with its 24 glossy, fully-painted pages will set you back a nickel shy of 15 bucks! But it's a beautiful little package, like so many other Fantagraphics' products. Trosper has that quality of being something that immediately sticks in your mind and when you come back to it again - and you will, many times - you find things you missed before. It is a simple story to understand, so I won't spoil it for you by explaining it. But I will say that if Jim Woodring can put so much energy and dark imagination into something simple, I'd just love to see him attempt something with balls (if you'll eventually pardon the pun).

I can honestly say that I have seen nothing quite like this before and "unique" wouldn't be putting too fine a point on it. Trosper is thoroughly different. Forget the Bill Frisell ambient jazz CD that comes neatly parcelled into the back of the book - that is pleasant, but you think you're getting an album and it turns out to be an extended CD single. If this were any other company than Fantagraphics I would have thought this was a gimmick, but I get the impression that once Frisell saw Trosper he thought deeply about what the music should sound like (the book was originally intended for release over a year ago so he had time to think). His interpretation is not what I would've envisaged, but that isn't really the point. The fact is that the music doesn't really go with the artwork - but that's unimportant.

One gets the impression that Woodring (better known for his anthropomorphic character Frank) hasn't finished with this playful, yet easily upset pachyderm and that brings us back to the fact that Fantagraphics is marketing this as a book for all ages. While I have no problems with that, I really do think that it would be difficult to convince children of anything other than what the pictures illustrate - and while the themes addressed in this story could well prove important lessons in later development, I think kids are going to be more reluctant to turn the light off at night than ever before. If I had to give this a target audience I'd be struggling, but that doesn't detract from the fact that this has all the hallmarks of innovative and outstanding work from yet another Fantagraphics-stabled creator of whom the rest of the world is probably ignorant, yet who is possibly the future winner of a major literary award.

The Verdict: Brilliantly simplistic (PH).



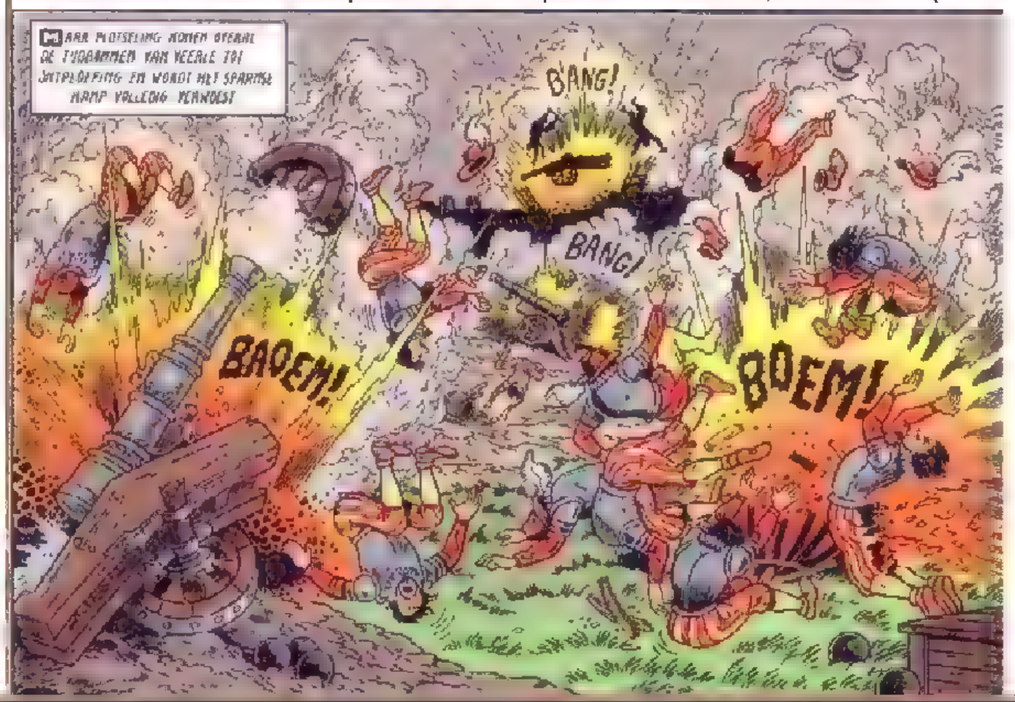
BEAUTIFUL LOSERS

Lionised by the critics, loved by a small hardcore of fans, completely ignored by everybody else. In this series of columns, we look at the comics series which should've done far better than they did and which vanished far too quickly. These, then, are the Beautiful Losers.

This month: Mike Kidson on Willy Vandersteen's De Geuzen (Uitgeverij Standaard)

IN a commercial sense Vandersteen's swan song wasn't really a loser; there's every reason to assume that, like many of his earlier creations, it would have carried on as a studio production had he not died while still working on it. In an aesthetic sense, though, the ten albums that exist demonstrate very clearly how such a studio regime would have lacked the magic of the original concept - because Vandersteen had himself removed that magic after the first four albums.

The subject of the 16th century wars between the inhabitants of Flanders and their Spanish overlords had recurred at various points in Vandersteen's work, notably in the 1952 Suske en Wiske album Het Spaanse Spook (The Spanish Ghost) and in a series that he and Karel Verscheure produced for Kuifje (Tintin) Magazine later in the same decade, based on the adventures of Northern European folk hero Tijl Uilenspiegel. In 1973 he began to work up a new series set in that period, producing eleven pages which indicate a highly cartoony and comedic approach. That first tryout was scrapped; but just over a decade later Vandersteen revived it, revamped it considerably and began to produce what was to be his last published creation, De Geuzen (the name for the Flemish freedom fighters).



The first four stories in the series constitute an arc which begins with freedom fighter Hannes' courtship of farmer's daughter Veerle, against her father's will, and ends with the couple's marriage. Their romance is the humanising, down to earth factor imposed on a setting riven with war and destruction, in which the Spaniards attempt to subdue the Flemish rebels with a reign of terror of the kind depicted in the paintings of Hieronymous Bosch and Pieter Breughel the Elder. Breughel, however, is just as well known for his paintings of peasant weddings and skaters - and in that breadth of scope he is very much the inspiration for Vandersteen's series. The horror of war is juxtaposed not just with the story of two young lovers but with the popular life and culture of Renaissance Flanders - the enemy must be fought, but the harvest must also be got in, and there will always be time for a drink and a dance and a flirtation. The horror is offset by humour too - even the Spaniards may at one moment be bloodthirsty, at another bumbling and ridiculous.

But there's much more to these stories - so much, in fact, that reading them is almost a dizzying experience. Magic and myth are depicted alongside historical events. The romance of Hannes and Veerle is paralleled by not one but *two* others - the fond and physical relationship between the aged alchemist Oostranamus and his wife, and the cold, practical liaison between two upper class quislings, Johannes Rattenbol and Joan Collins lookalike Lady Alexis. That's right, J.R. and Alexis - Vandersteen throws *Dallas* jokes and other contemporary references gleefully into the mix, and

such is the richness of the resulting brew that somehow none of it seems incongruous. Lovingly detailed and cartoony art add to the lusciousness of it all, which is yet further enhanced by a glorious palette of colours.

Yet Vandersteen must have been aware that such a wealth of story elements, such a heady mixture of romance, comedy, tragedy, history, and folklore, could hardly be sustained by anyone else - and it had long been his practice to work on his new series for a while then turn them over to studio employees for continuation while he concentrated on new ideas. So the fifth De Geuzen album presents a very different picture. The art has become more realistic. Myth, magic, 20th century references and all characters associated with them have all been swept away. The overall panorama of the wars has been reduced to small, specific skirmishes between the heroes and random groups of Spaniards. Each of the last six albums contains individual stories, and the art and events depicted become even more realistic album by album.

As a demonstration of how Vandersteen transformed a wildly free-flowing personal vision into a formulaic setup which could be replicated by any competent studio artist versed in his style, those last six albums are technically fascinating. But from an aesthetic point of view, the formula was far inferior to the original, personal vision. Perhaps in time it would have been turned over to an artist who could have made it his own and re-invested it with a touch of magic, as had happened when Karel Bideloo got into his stride after taking over Vandersteen's De Rode Ridder. But, as it stands, the cancellation of the series after Vandersteen's death must, from an aesthetic point of view, be regarded as a mercy killing. But it was a killing which, by preventing the extension of the formula for many more years, allowed us to focus much more clearly on the delights of those first four albums – the last great work of one of Europe's greatest comics creators.

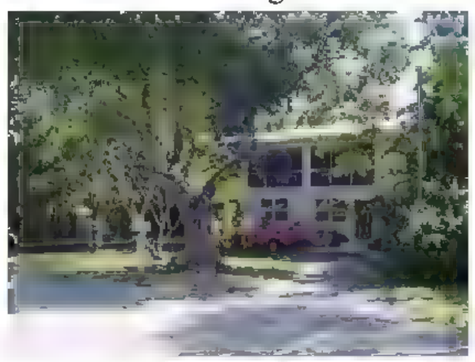
COMICS CREATORS – WHY THEY'RE BETTER THAN YOU!

A WORLD OF HEROS *Special Investigation*

YOU want to work in comics. Don't you? Of course you do. Everyone who reads comics does. You watch the constant whirlwind of changing creators as they dance from title to title and you think to yourself "I could do that!" Don't you? Yes, you do. And that goes doubly for people who write for comics magazines, and even more so for the hard-bitten, cynical writers of spoof news columns.

But you can't. Comics creators are special, and you're not. Here's why:

- Comics creators create comics, which makes them artists. You read comics, which makes you a geek.
- Every month you trek down to the local comic shop, desperate to know what wonderful stories your favourite creators are going to tell you next. Those same creators don't care whether you live or die.
- You queue for hours to meet comics creators for a few meagre minutes, but no comics creator has ever queued to meet you.
- Comics creators get paid to write or draw. You get paid to flip burgers or something.
- You show your portfolios and scripts to creators in the vain hope that they'll bless you with a few words of even faint praise. They don't come to you, because your approval means nothing to them.
- Comics creators are in high demand because they can create wonderful things. There are a million mindless proles who could do your job.
- Editors actually want to receive work from comics creators, whereas they could throw your submissions straight into the bin without even so much as a moment's thought.

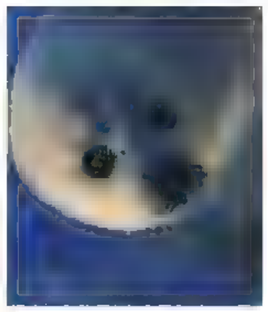


- Comics creators don't have to slog down to their local comic shop to pick up the latest issues of the best titles, because they're writing or drawing them. In their spare time they phone each other to laugh at you and tell dirty jokes about your mother.
- Comics creators can do their jobs without even leaving the house. You have to spend hours driving through crowds of inconsiderate mindless nothings, or cramming yourself into a dirty, crowded, fetid tube train just to get to a job that you hate.

- When a comics creator dies, they leave behind a legacy of distraught fans and respectful colleagues, whereas if you were to die tomorrow, no one would notice.
- Comics creators have scripts and sketches lying unwanted around their houses. If you were to get your hands on just one of them, you would frame it and put it on the wall, and talk about it in everyday conversation, and worship it as if Jesus himself had just handed it to you with the instruction that the chances of all your descendants getting into heaven depended purely upon it remaining in tip-top condition. A comics creator would consider such behaviour to be stupid.
- World Of Heros is devoted to

talking about comics creators. It may be a spoof, it may take the piss out of them, but there aren't any magazine columns devoted to you at all. Not even ones taking the piss.

- You wish you could be a comics creator. No comics creator has ever wished they could be you.
- Comics creators' ideas are published on a monthly, even weekly basis. No one cares what you think.
- When comics creators go to conventions, they meet friends, get drunk, and have a good time. When you go to conventions you spend hours in queues like a sweaty, pathetic sheep.
- Go into your local comic shop. Go on. Now, look at the people in there. If you were to



take out a knife, and I'm talking about a really fucking big knife, with a huge serrated blade and a handle that you could use to club seals to death, and use it to hack your throat open then and there on the spot, spewing out astonishing fountains of blood as you floundered almost comically around before collapsing to the ground to bleed out your last in a sorry, unwanted heap in the corner, people in the shop would care more about the prospect of you having damaged their comics by spattering blood on them than about your slowly cooling corpse.

- Comics creators get the respect of their peers. Nobody respects you at all.
- Have you actually read work by Alan Moore or Grant Morrison? You could never be that creative or intelligent. Could you? No.

- At signings, comics creators get paid to sign their name. At signings, you queue for hours to have someone deface your comics.
- Hundreds, even thousands of people write to comics creators every month. The only letters you regularly get are sent by cold, emotionless automated systems operating on behalf of grubby-handed company executives hoping you'll be stupid enough to sign up for their credit cards.
- If Alan Moore walked into a comic shop, everyone would know who he was. If you walked into a comic shop, nobody would notice you even existed.
- You just read this article. A comics creator would never have done that.

YOUNG GUNS

It's not age but talent that determines tomorrow's stars today... this issue: Simon Gurr

IT all started when I was eight. Metal behemoths hundreds of feet tall were demolishing Britain. They had names like Tyranno-Mek and King Konka. They were the Terra-Meks, my earliest comics memory. After 2000AD Prog 100, I wanted to be a comic artist.

Ten years later, I confess, I was unfaithful. I left the big robots behind when I went to art school, taking instead "grown-up" comics like [Gaiman and McKean's] Violent Cases. I'd found a degree course where my interest in comics was actively encouraged and I was even sent on exchange to live in France, land of la bande dessinée! What I saw in Marseille formed the basis of my major comic project when I went on to do an MA in narrative illustration.

After college my first project was Mysterious Ways, a post-war murder story by Nick Goodey. At this time my professional work was mainly in books and magazines, not comics, but most of it had a strong storytelling element. I illustrated the role-playing scenarios in *Arcane* for its entire run, covering every genre from medieval fantasy to Lovecraftian horror to space opera, and went on to work for Wizards of the Coast, drawing… big robots!

I returned to comics with some work for the first *Crisp!* comics exhibition, where I met writer Ferg Handley. We collaborated on *It's Not What You're Worth*, a WWI strip which saw print in football magazine Foul!. However, the paying comic work still wasn't happening, so I made a sideways move into web design and animation.

After a couple of years the call of comics became too powerful. DreddCon was on the horizon and I'd noticed that 2000AD was getting better and better under Andy Diggle's editorship. I decided to enter Tharg's PitchFest, thinking that if I could get a half-decent story under the editor's nose it might get my artwork noticed. I enlisted the help of my actor brother Pete for the writing and together we came up with *The Enhancer*, a homage to Alan Moore's rhyming *Future Shocks*. Despite my stage-fright, the script-pitching event was tremendous fun and I'd recommend it to anyone with a story to tell. Thanks largely to Pete's performance *The Enhancer* came joint first. We wrote it up as a full *Future Shock* script, it was accepted

A NORMAL HOUSE, A NORMAL STREET
A NORMAL COUPLE ABOUT TO EAT
HOW MUCH LONGER ARE YOU GOING TO BE? COME DOWNSTAIRS AND HAVE YOUR TEA
JUST ONE MESSAGE LEFT TO READ, I'VE GOT A BAD CONNECTION SPEED!
YOU SPEND ALL NIGHT ON THAT P.C WITH NO ATTENTION SPARED FOR ME!
17
YOUR VIRTUAL MATES ARE ALL YOU'VE GOT YOUR REAL LIFE IS NOT SO HOT
HOW THERE'S SOMEONE AT THE DOOR WON'T BE YOUR FRIENDS THAT'S FOR SURE
Hello!
Future Shocks
THE ENHANCER
THE GURR BROTHERS
SIMON GURR

and I was even commissioned to draw it. Finally, the ambition inspired by the Terra-Meks was about to be realised.

Since DreddCon I've been involved in some interesting small press projects, drawing Jay Eales' boxer *Knuckles* for Violent! and providing the cover and a promotional strip for the first issue of 2000AD fanzine Zarjaz.

At the end of last year I was lucky enough to be made Bristol's "graphic novelist in residence" as part of the city's application for European Capital of Culture. This has been a fantastic opportunity, giving me total creative freedom to illustrate a script by a literary hero of mine, novelist Eugene Byrne. There are no giant robots in Saint Vincent's Rock, but there are giants. It's about the creatures of local legend and folklore, and a city's dependence on stories.

Next up, more *Knuckles* for Violent! #5 and I'm drawing a hilarious Dredd script by Nigel Poll for Class of '79. Several scripts are in the works, which I'll be drawing and publishing as a collection called Finisterre. They're short, sci-fi flavoured strips, and yes, there will be big robots.

Artists! Want to be featured in ***Drawing Board*** *or* ***Young Guns****? Contact Phil Hall at phil.hall@borderline.mediahall.co.uk or editorial@borderline.mediahall.co.uk*
We're constantly looking for established artists and newcomers to give them exposure they might otherwise fail to get from other comics magazines!

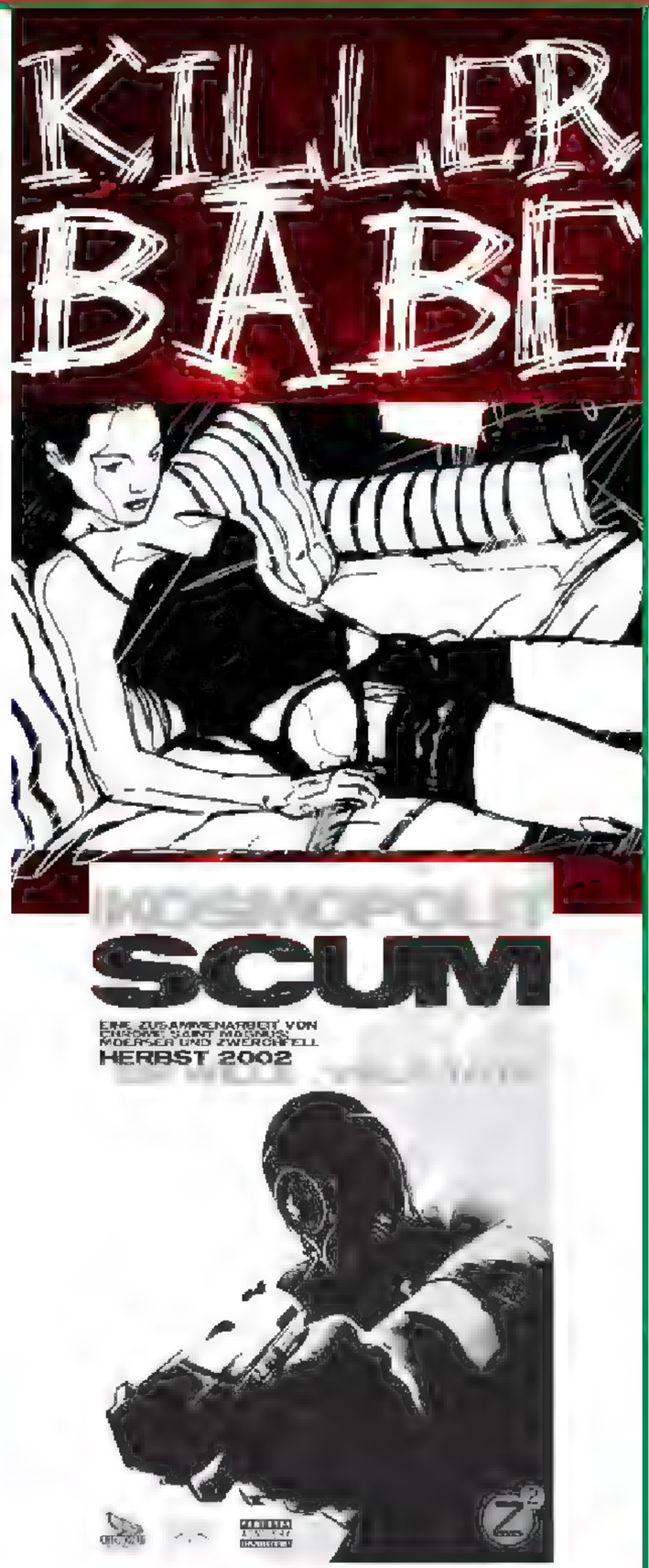
JUNGE KANONEN – SASCHA THAU

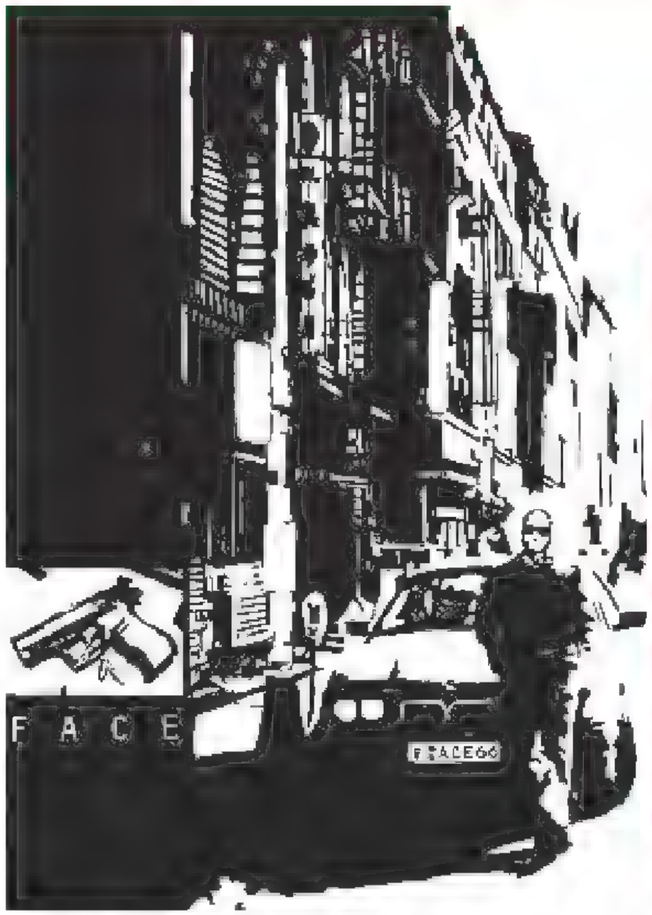
"I'M 28 years old, have stumbled through the German Comicbook Scene for three years now, write a weekly column for Comicgate.de, try to write comicbooks, try to draw comicbooks and work as a freelance graphic designer. It's very difficult to make money with comicbooks in Germany or even get the money back you invested, so as a bread and butter job I have to fully rely on my design abilities. So far I've published a short story and several pinups. Right now I'm working on my first graphic novel. It's called Der Kosmopolit: Scum. It's a story about a renegade secret agent, kind of like *The Prisoner* meets John Woo meets Don Quixote. Simply put, he quits and fights his old agency, because he can't stand killing people for the sake of a country. He knows there's no chance to succeed, but he's fighting them nevertheless. That pretty much sums up myself, trying to live as a comicbook artist, but in the end I'm just a little voice hailing from Germany, which hopes it gets heard in America. I don't know if I can succeed, the chances are slim, but I at least try.

"I really admire the work of guys like Brian Wood (he's finally bringing some mature design to comicbooks), Mike Mignola, Adam Hughes and... err... photographers. A few years ago I read an interview with Timothy Bradstreet where he told how he shoots photos and traces them on a lightbox. That got me thinking and after I bought a Digital Camera there was no holding back. Most of my recent drawings are a combination of photographs and imagination. I really like this mixture, because it has a realistic basis and let me still draw things. While working with photos I have (sometimes) more control over layout and details, which results in better pages. On the other hand it's easier to do spectacular backgrounds because I have more time to think about how it should look, instead of losing time when I have to think about how I can draw this or that.

"I love the black and white contrast. The greatest pleasure for me is when people complain that pieces from me got coloured, because they lost all their contrast in the process. I believe that only when someone masters black and white successfully are they really ready for colour work. Most of today's comicbooks would look very confusing when published in b/w, cause most of the artists don't work with white or black spaces to lay out their pages, they just draw lines, lots of lines. Call me a design freak, but the ability to make a page shine in b/w is for me really important.

"In the beginning my dream was to be the first German comicbook artist to draw Spider-man regularly. Those were the days. I'm not much interested in drawing superheroes anymore. I've read so many books about the mafia, espionage and James Bond (haha) - I now have my own





ON THE EDGE

REVENANT

part 1 of 4

stories to tell. Today I hope I can sell my comicbook to as many people as I can. I really hope I'll find some French or American publishers when it's done. Der Kosmopolit will be published in late 2002. Then I will raise my voice and hope to attract some foreign publishers and readers. Now excuse me please, I have to draw a comicbook, have to make this deadline..."

Important links:
www.comicgate.de
www.zwerchfell.com
www.morser.de

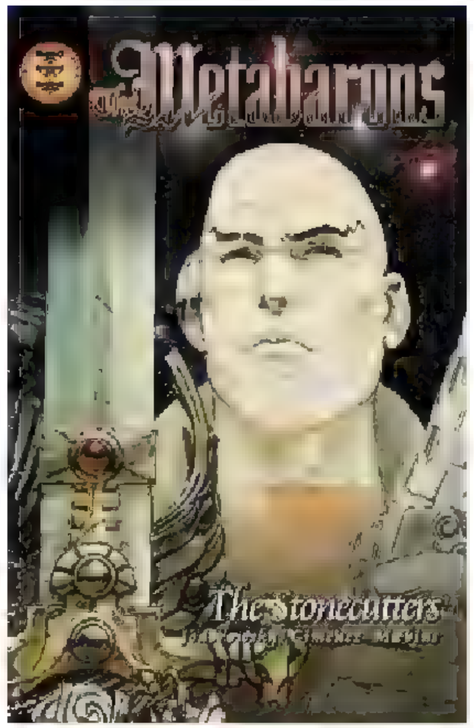
IT'S THAT MAN AGAIN

Back in 1977, at the tender age of 15, Phil Hall created a column for the UK fanzine Media. Using the same title as Tommy Handley's BBC radio show of the 1940s, Phil digged and delved into the unconfirmed, the maybe and the scandalous. 25 years later comics' first ITMA and his intrepid team attempt to pinpoint today's movers and shakers in the comics world… (Meanwhile, in 2002 ITMA is now the official acronym for the Institute of Trademark Accountants!)

Bashing the Bish – One

A couple of weeks ago I was on one of the UK-based Internet forums and fellow editor and one-time Tharg (the **2000AD** editorial persona) David Bishop made the comment (and I probably paraphrase) "You can only read so many worthy articles about Brazilian comics…" Now, I'm naturally going to want to defend myself here, I'm the guy who believes we should have worthy Brazilian comics features (hey, I'm angling for a free holiday in Rio…), but what this actually did was spotlight a common observation and one I've seen manifest in a number of places - which is, basically, "we like what we like and we don't really care that much about what others like". Which harks back to the comments I made in this column two months ago about born again Christians and die-hard US comics' fans - you, the ones who wouldn't know a bande dessinée if it bit you on the ass; not only wouldn't know it, but you wouldn't care either. If it isn't what you like then it ain't what you want to read about and I'm not lying here either, am I?

After nearly a year of producing this magazine I know that an article about superheroes or mainstream creators is going to be read by more of the Western-based readers than anything else and it doesn't matter how much I try to ram home to all of you that Fred Bloggs' small press opus is as good as the new John Byrne



series, you're probably not going to take much notice of me (OK, bad example, but you catch my drift). And that is a sad indictment, because admitting that we're a bunch of anally retentive, set-in-our-ways, repressed geeks suffering from creative tunnel-vision isn't really going to do a lot for that image issue I was talking about last month.

I was looking at the copies of **Metabarons** #1 that Ian Sattler sent over for last issue's competition and it was as clear as the nose on my face why eclectic, quality European stuff is likely to be overlooked like rabbit road kill. You have to think about it, and in our Western throwaway culture thinking about something is a waste of time, energy and isn't going to make you any money or have your friends speechless because of them being impressed by your foresight and creative acumen. The UK and US actually have a different interpretation of the term "throwaway".

The new black?

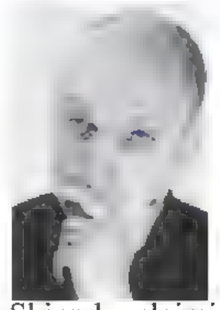
BASIC Memorabilia has become the new black in terms of collectibles. If someone famous took a shit on it, in it or over it, it's worth money. Memorabilia is a broader version of comics collecting - a fad we saw comics embrace with the beginnings of the trading cards phenomenon in the Nineties, but probably more through Rock and Roll, then Sporting Memorabilia.

However, new comics have been left behind. Back issues are almost in vogue again, especially at memorabilia collectors' fairs. The few dealers who brave things such as Made in Heaven's huge UK Memorabilia conventions normally do well, but for all the wrong reasons, selling all the things they probably thought it would be a waste of time taking along.

There are more and more memorabilia auctions and fairs and shows setting up every month, not just in the UK, but in the US and in other countries as well. Where Christie's and Sotheby's embraced - at arm's length - rare comics, they're positively wanting to have the babies of general memorabilia… And remember the golden rule - "it's valuable to *someone*!" - which, of course, means that eventually all those piles of shite UK Marvels will actually be worth something!

Bashing the Bish – Two

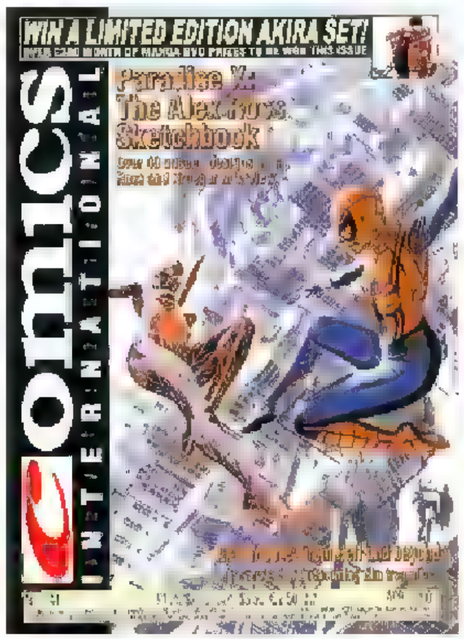
IN the latest *Comics International*, Dave Bishop was having another pop at us, this time in defence of said magazine.



Borderline levelled three swipes at *CI* last month; the first being in my editorial where Bish says I'm having a go at my old mate Dez Skinn by claiming he panders to publishers. Well, Dave, if you can prove to me that he doesn't I'll put a full retraction in this column next month.

Dave's second accusation was levelled at the lovely Carol Close, when he claimed that she was out of order for calling *CI* an obscure British trade paper or some such… well, guess what Dave? When I last worked there *CI* was selling 8,000 copies a month, predominantly in the UK only - if that isn't a good definition of obscure I don't know what is.

And finally, Davey boy took umbrage at the review of *CI*, claiming that while we hated it we had to concede that it was still the



best at what it does. I didn't write the review but I agree. I also felt that we probably shouldn't have run the review. Not because of my connections to *CI*, but because the review was a bit too like the one that appeared in *The Comics Journal* last month. How come we

Wenig später...
Oje, hoffentlich sieht uns jetzt keiner!
Tja, da hast du Pech! Sie läuft nämlich direkt auf die große Kreuzung zu!

got the accusation levelled at us, Dave, and *TCJ* was clean forgotten?

Perhaps I can answer that one for him. Dave probably isn't even reading this. He only downloaded last issue because he was in it - he was doing, as we say in the trade, a Gibbo. If you want to know what a Gibbo is, send your questions to *CI*'s *Q&A* column marked FAO: Dave Bishop

This one's a Biggi!

SPEAKING of *Comics International*, when this column was first adapted for that magazine one of the things I insisted on was to spotlight for collectors and speculators alike all of those bargains and possible money spinning potentials. After a certain reluctance on the part of the editor was overcome by the growing market trends, we settled into being one of the best places to get tips for potential speculator investments.

Why stop now?

Bastei Verlag, the main German publisher of weekly comics from the 1970s to the 1990s, had particular success during the 1980s with horror comics such as **Gespenster Geschichten** and girls' titles such as **Vanessa** (horror), **Conny** (horses) and **Biggi** (romance).

Throughout the 90s these Bastei weeklies were commonly to be found on flea markets throughout Germany (which are basically large scale car boot sales, set up outdoors at weekends), selling in large stacks for only a Deutschmark or two.

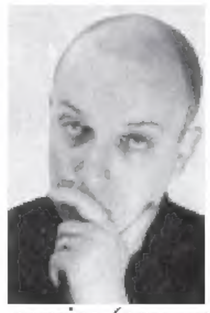
However, recent eBay bidding shows a considerable upswing of interest in one title in particular, **Biggi**. Originating as a reprint/translation of an obscure 1980s Fleetway teen romance strip named *Patti's World*, the Bastei series ran out of UK material after 83 weekly issues and did a 'Marvelman', carrying straight on with a German-scripted, Spanish-drawn version which retained two characters, junked the rest, transferred the setting from England to America and built up a new supporting cast which was remarkably similar to the original one. In this form it ran very successfully for more than 200 further issues, also generating a series of digest-sized volumes, numerous album-sized specials and audio adaptations.

Currently, sizeable lots of **Biggi** back issues are attracting a high level of bidding, with up to a dozen bidders weighing in during the auction time. By contrast, other comparable Bastei titles of the same age remain in the doldrums, attracting one or two bids at most. Prices are not exactly high as yet, but the current level of demand is clearly outstripping supply, and we all know what happen then, don't we?

The interest in **Biggi** is hard to explain, unless it's that the German-originated issues now qualify as "good girl art" - the rather downbeat suburban setting of the British version was glamorised, and the heroines took to running around in nighties on a regular basis. However, the same applied to **Vanessa**, the Bastei horror title for girls which began by reprinting material from the Fleetway weekly **Misty**, and demand for that remains minimal... so who knows? Whatever the reasons, this one time wallflower of the flea markets seems to be fast becoming a German collectible with particularly strong demand for the scarcer issues, in the 110-130 range and the late 200s.

And did you see how I managed to get through that entire piece without making a joke at **Biggi**'s expense?

While Bish fiddles Rio burns...



DAVID Bishop (can you see a theme beginning to appear here...?) might think that **Borderline** runs one too many worthy articles about Brazilian comics (one wonders what he'll make of our look at Antipodean comics in a couple of months), but it just about shows the level of ignorance prevalent in today's new breed of comics editors, especially when you realise that in some countries on this planet the comics industry really is vitally important to their economic survival.

Back in the early days of this magazine, while I was knee-deep in my three-part article on Brazil, I'd arranged for an interview with the Disney of South American comics, Mauricio de Sousa. Two-thirds of the way through the "worthy" article I fired off the first part of my interview with him... and never heard another word for 5 months.

I dropped the occasional hint, but it wasn't until I was putting this issue together that I decided to take the bull by the horns and confront my MSP contact and ask her what the hell I'd said in my interview questions to prompt this sudden and now very long silence.

My good friend Yara Maura Silva, de Sousa's sister, who has been my liaison at MSP for 6 years, finally wrote back and eased my fears. However, her reply put a few things into perspective: while the rest of the world's comics industries have been plodding along, minding their own business, Mauricio de Sousa has been fighting, not just to keep his company as one of the most important in Brazil, but also with his government and for the United Nations to help homeless children all over the world and not just in Brazil. Maura didn't mince words when she told me, "... [It's difficult] to express what we're facing with so many crises affecting businesses and people in all areas of so-called humanity".

It sounds grim, but of course this is the work that this comics company is committed to doing for the under privileged and the poor. No cynicism involved, just honest people providing entertainment and behind the scenes humanitarian aid. Can you imagine Marvel doing something like that?

Sorry, I forgot, you don't *really* care, do you?

WORLD OF HEROS

Bill Jemas "King of castle" - claims that Paul Levitz is "Dirty rascal" so far unsubstantiated

Chris Spicer & the World of Heros investigative team continue to scour their imaginations for all kinds of bollocks...

Crossgen receive record number of Harvey nominations

FLORIDA-based toilet paper company CrossGen has received a shocking 15 nominations across nine categories at this year's Harvey awards.

The surprise nominees included two for Mark Waid – one as Best Writer, although Waid later requested his nomination be withdrawn after receiving a threatening letter from the Advertising Standards agency; the other as Most Laughably Thin-skinned Creator and All-Round Fat Bloke, which he is expected to win, despite heavy competition from Mike W. Barr and his hamburger collection...

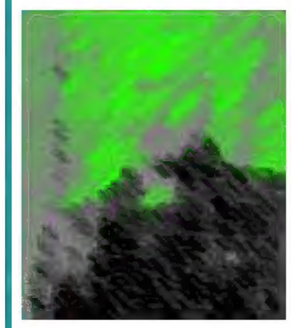
The Harveys, this year sponsored by CrossGen Comics, were among the oldest and most respected awards in the comics industry. Nominations are drawn up from ballots sent to over 2000 industry creators. CrossGen, who recently took on several new members of staff, taking the total number of employees to over 2000, is delighted by the list of nominees.

"It's incredible!" ejaculated CrossGen CEO Mark Alessi. "This list of nominees proves that CrossGen creators can slap themselves on the back with the best of them!" Although we at WOH would like to see anyone slap themselves on the back as it would probably be funny.

According to Alessi, the final vote will take place "as soon as we've figured out a foolproof way of rigging it."

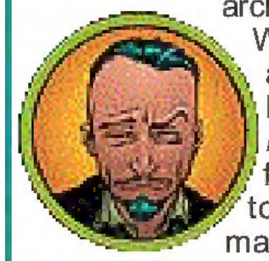
In other news, CrossGen later announced that Alessi had blown his nose as part of their initiative to issue a press release about every single fucking thing they do. WORLD OF HEROS

"YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND MY GENIUS" – WARREN ELLIS



IN an incredible about face, renowned comics creator Warren Ellis *(left, below & bottom)* finally sees the release of one of his multitude of conceptual rights properties in comics form. Ellis, who for the last three years has survived purely on the hand outs of his on-line discussion forum, has been flooding the market with as many ideas as possible in an attempt to be able to "sue the arses off" anyone who attempts to come up with an idea that is vaguely similar to one of his ideas.

The new comic called Warren Ellis's Dodgy Concepts is about a time lost dead guy who initiates the world's first space program while working as a reporter for CNN and investigating strange archaeological mysteries.



When approached and asked for his comments Ellis said to *World of Heros*, "I'm far too fucking superior to talk to you or your poxy magazine... besides, I'm sure I had the idea for Borderline before that twat Hall..." WORLD OF HEROS

Borderline gets budget - Editor says "It just depends on how far you're prepared to go for a fiver, big boy."

EISNERS INSTIGATE MASS SUICIDE

AFTER the shock of CrossGen being nominated for fifteen Harvey Awards, the comics industry was dealt another bitch-slap as the list of Eisner Award nominees was announced. Unfortunately, the announcement that DC had clocked up the most nominations - a bewildering twenty-nine – proved too much for some fans, and several deaths have already been reported.

"It's incredible!" squealed bucket-lover Paul Levitz. "This list of nominations is fantastic – with this many we're bound to win something, although obviously we'll be pushing for the Best Comic Published By DC Comics category next year to make sure of it." Asked about the suicides, Levitz told us "Statistically speaking, they're pretty likely to be Marvel readers, so I'm not really bothered. Have you seen my collection of buckets? They're all very nice and all award free!" WORLD OF HEROS

HULK'S LEAP UP THE CHARTS IS " INCREDIBLE!"

MARVEL has expressed girlish delight at the sudden increase in sales of **The Hulk**. The title, which has seen sales swell since the arrival of Bruce Jones and John Romita Jr. on creative duties, has leapt up a massive 32 places in Diamond's sales charts.

"It's incredible!" squealed one Marvel spokesperson. "Suddenly the Hulk is selling really well! Who would have thought that to sell comics, all you need are talented writers and artists? For years we've been trying different sales gimmicks - costly enhanced covers, pricey inserts, pointless guest appearances, hugely complicated crossovers... And then a good writer and a good artist come along and show us all how to do it! We've been slapping our foreheads at the House of Ideas, let me tell you, yessiree!"

Marvel's Head of Ludicrous Over-Promotion Bill Rosemann told us "Working for Marvel is like kissing Barney the purple annoying dinosaur from US TV - all well and good, but you wouldn't want to use your tongue."

When asked Avi Arad actually declined to comment as he was French-kissing a purple dinosaur and fondling its love handles salaciously... WORLD OF HEROS

"Don't come running to me if you break your legs" states Marvel's Bill Jemas in a shock press release...

COMICS 2040

COMICS NEWS FROM THE FUTURE BEAMED DIRECTLY INTO YOUR UNDISCERNING BRAIN BY PAUL RAINEY!

UNSOLICITED SUBMISSIONS BAN STANDS!

DC SECURITY HAVE INSTALLED NEW SOFTWARE ONTO EVERY COMPANY WORKSTATION WHICH SCANS E MAILS FOR UNSOLICITED SUBMISSIONS.

DEMONSTRATION
BOOM!
MY HANDS MY HANDS!
IF YOU DON'T WANT TO BE RESPONSIBLE FOR MAIMING OR KILLING A MEMBER OF DC STAFF OR EVEN ONE OF YOUR FAVOURITE CREATORS
THEN DON'T SEND US YOUR UNSOLICITED SUBMISSIONS!

MIRACLE MAN OWNERSHIP ISSUES RESOLVED!

AFTER NEARLY FORTY YEARS, THE REAL OWNER OF MIRACLE MAN IS ESTABLISHED IN COURT AS THIS MAN

COMICS FANS ARE SNAPPING UP COPIES OF ONE OF THE MOST EAGERLY ANTICIPATED COMIC BOOK COLLECTIONS OF ALL TIME. SO, WHAT DO THEY THINK OF IT?

I ALREADY READ IT WHEN IT WAS ORIGINALLY SERIALISED IN WARRIOR.
I ALREADY READ IT WHEN IT WAS ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED BY ECLIPSE.
SO WHY HAVE YOU BOUGHT IT AGAIN?
I DON'T KNOW.
I NEVER READ IT BEFORE NOW AND, QUITE FRANKLY, IT'S DISAPPOINTING.
DOES THIS MEAN THAT NEIL GAIMAN WILL AT LAST FINISH WRITING THE STORY HE BEGAN NEARLY FIFTY YEARS AGO?
ENGLISH? I'M NOT ENGLISH! I'M AMERICAN! I SAY 'ASS', NOT 'ARSE'!
DEATH OBSESSED ADOLESCENT GIRLS THINK MY WRITING IS BEAUTIFUL. THEY THINK I'M BEAUTIFUL.
WAIT A MINUTE! I'M NOT NEIL GAIMAN! NEIL GAIMAN LIVES NEXT DOOR! I'M TERRY MOORE!

DC BAN GOOD IDEAS!

LEE SATCHEL, THE WRITER OF **ROBO WIZARD** – THE BOOK SERIES WHICH HAS EARNED IT'S CREATOR BILLIONS OF DOLLARS – REVEALED IN A RECENT INTERVIEW THAT, FIVE YEARS AGO, HE WORKED FOR DC.

I GOT FIRED FOR HAVING A GOOD IDEA.
I WENT TO ONE OF THE EDITORS WITH ROBO WIZARD. HE WENT ALL WHITE AND HAD SECURITY ESCORT ME OUT OF THE BUILDING.
DC CONFIRMED THE GOOD IDEA BAN—
WE ARE COMPLETELY HAPPY WITH THE CHARACTERS WE HAVE ALREADY, THANK YOU VERY MUCH.
CHARACTERS LIKE HAWKMAN AND AQUAMAN ARE TIMELESS, EVEN IF THE GENERAL PUBLIC DON'T AGREE.

PLUG CORNER
WITH JOHN RICHSTONE
THE COMIC BOOK STORE TO RECEIVE A PLUG IN MY COLUMN THIS WEEK IS... FOREIGN PRESS
AS WELL AS GIVING ME TEN PERCENT DISCOUNT AND FREE GRAPHIC NOVELS, THE OWNER ALSO ALLOWED ME TO GRATIFY MY ODIOUS SEXUAL APPETITE WITH HIS THREE GRANDSONS.
I HAVE NO IDEA IF THE STORE IS ANY GOOD OR NOT.

WIN WIN WIN WIN WIN WIN

In association with Big Finish Productions
Borderline is giving away 5 CDs of
Judge Dredd – Wanted: Dredd or Alive

Big Finish Productions launches its 2000AD Presents range of audio adventures with a story written by former Megazine editor and Dredd novelist David Bishop. With a new adventure for Judge Dredd, Rogue Trooper or Strontium Dog promised every month, the future is CD-shaped!

Borderline has five copies of Judge Dredd - Wanted: Dredd or Alive to give away to the first five names drawn out of the Judge's helmet on July 1st, with the correct answers to the following questions:

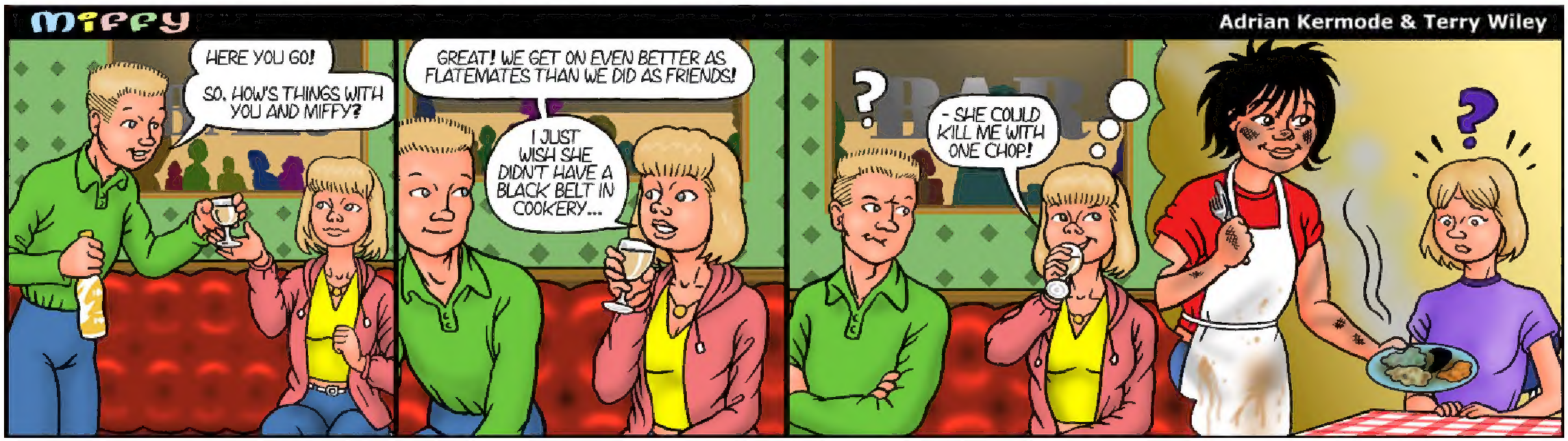
What is the name of Dredd's clone brother?

a) Rico
b) Harpo
c) Drano

Who were the creators of Judge Dredd?

a) Burns & Allen
b) Wagner & Ezquerra
c) Byrne & Claremont

Send your answers either by email to: editorial@borderline.mediahall.co.uk
or on a postcard to the editorial address before July 1st 2002.


Miffy
Adrian Kermode & Terry Wiley
HERE YOU GO!
SO, HOW'S THINGS WITH YOU AND MIFFY?
GREAT! WE GET ON EVEN BETTER AS FLATEMATES THAN WE DID AS FRIENDS!
I JUST WISH SHE DIDN'T HAVE A BLACK BELT IN COOKERY...
?
- SHE COULD KILL ME WITH ONE CHOP!
?